It is an incredible honor, and a daunting task, to mark this milestone on behalf of Becket; and in seeking inspiration, I looked to the first time an anniversary celebrating religious liberty was marked in America, one all the more striking because it occurred even before the Founding, and because it was inspired by a verse in Jewish scripture, a verse that America helped make famous.

The story begins in 1701, when William Penn enshrined in Pennsylvania a Charter guaranteeing freedom of conscience. Penn insisted in the charter that no one “shall be in any case molested or prejudiced ... to engage religious Worship, Place or Ministry, contrary to his or their Mind, or to do or super any other Act or Thing, contrary to their religious Persuasion.” He called this document demanding religious freedom his “Holy Experiment.”

William Penn’s protégé was a man named James Logan, one of the foremost experts in Hebrew in America. Logan taught Hebrew to his daughter Sally, whom he described as a child “reading the 34th Psalm in Hebrew, the letters of which she learned very perfectly in less than 2 hour’s time, an experiment I made of her capacity only for my Diversion.” Sally, in turn, married Isaac Norris, speaker of the State Assembly, and a Hebraist in his own right, though his father-in-law, amusingly, was unimpressed, saying of the man...
who married his gifted daughter, “if he had as much skill in ye Greek as he has in Hebrew he would merit the general reputation of a Learned man.” Now that’s a father-in-law.

In 1751, Isaac Norris, the man whose Hebrew was better than his Greek, commissioned a bell from London to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Charter, the fiftieth anniversary of religious liberty in Pennsylvania. Knowing the Hebrew Bible, Isaac Norris chose to emblazon the bell with words from Leviticus, a verse describing how every fifty years, indentured servants are freed: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof.” In Biblical Israel, as described in the Torah, the way in which freedom was proclaimed was through the blowing of a shofar, a ram’s horn, but there weren’t a lot of people proficient in shofar blowing in Colonial Pennsylvania, so Isaac Norris decided to go with a bell instead, a bell whose peals proclaimed religious liberty; and he selected the finest foundry in London and the oldest in England, the Whitechapel Foundry in order to produce it.

A good bell should last hundreds of years. But that is not what occurred. The bell arrived from Whitechapel, and broke immediately, and so it had to be recast anew by the American craftsman John Pass and John Stow, which is why their names are inscribed upon the Bell. This bell also did not make it to a century. On February 26, 1846 the Philadelphia papers reported, "The old Independence Bell rang its last clear note on Monday last in honor of the birthday of Washington and now hangs in the great city steeple irreparably cracked .... It gave out clear notes and loud, and appeared to be in excellent condition until noon, when it received a sort of compound fracture in a zig-zag direction through one of its sides which put it completely out of tune and left it a mere wreck of what it was." Thus, the original liberty bell was a lemon; and the second liberty bell has not been heard since 1846. Meanwhile in 1976, as America marked its bicentennial, a group of American pranksters gathered at the Whitechapel Foundry in London, which was still in business, demanding that it make up for its original inferior product, and replace the current cracked bell in Philadelphia. They carried signs that read WE GOT A LEMON and WHAT ABOUT THE WARRANTY? Eventually, the Whitechapel Foundry issues a statement in response, saying that “we would be happy to replace the bell - as long as it was returned to us in its original packaging.”
Given all this, given that the story of the bell is a tale of fracturing and silencing, a cynic might say that the liberty bell is, well, not all it’s cracked up to be. But we know that the bell has lost none of its symbolic power, and thus the story of it being seemingly silenced provides us with a meaningful metaphor. There are always challenges to the unfolding of liberty, there have always been those that questioned, or attempted to undo, the American experiment, who have sought to silence and efface the American idea. But liberty is not first and foremost about a bell, or a ram’s horn; these are external symbols. What truly proclaims liberty is action, men and women who are inspired by these symbols, who work and fight for freedom; it is they that proclaim liberty by the way they live and the way they lead. Through their lives, the shofar, or the bell, can be heard again.

In his prison memoir, Fear No Evil, Natan Sharansky describes going on a hunger strike when he was not allowed to receive correspondence from his family; finally, the Soviets permitted one postcard from his wife Avital, who never stopped working for his release. The postcard featured an image of shofar being blown at the Western Wall, and her written words, among which were: “Darling, what shofar must I blow for you to hear me?...I am with you all the time.” From that moment on, Sharansky tells us, his fight for freedom was renewed, because, as he put it, “now in my cell I distinctly heard the triumphant sounds of the shofar.” He resisted tyranny in prison, he further reflects, “so that nobody could drown out the shofar signals that Avital was sending me.”

It is through those that fight for liberty that liberty is proclaimed; through their actions the sound of freedom is heard. The liberty bell is not really silent; its message still rings, still calls to us, still obligates us. But you have to be willing to listen for it, and we live in a very noisy world, a cacophonous culture. In a very amusing essay, Joseph Epstein writes with annoyance of how cell phones have changed what was once a quiet commute to work: Everyone, I suspect, has had a moment when he wished he could grab the cell phone from a boisterous talker and smash it on the sidewalk. A friend of mine told me about sitting on a commuter train from her suburb into Chicago, in front of a young woman who made no fewer than ten cell phone calls to friends, explaining in great detail why she was changing the restaurant in which she was giving a lunch party that Saturday. Many of the people she called weren't in, so, in a loud and irritating voice, she left elaborate
instructions on voice mail about the change in plan along with the reasons for the change. "Hi, this is Amy Hemstead [I'm making up the name], and I thought I'd let you know that I've changed the location of Saturday's lunch from the Zodiac Cafe to Phil Stefani's. We're still meeting at noon. . . . " And then she babbled on a bit more as my friend, who fervently believes that trains are for reading not phoning, seethed in a quiet but genuine rage.

"Did you do anything about it?" I asked. "I said nothing," she replied, "but when I got to work, I called Stefani's and, using dear Amy's name, I cancelled her reservation for Saturday."

We do live in a cacophonous cultural cocoon, in which, sadly, faith is treasured less and less. But the exceptional story of America has always been one in which exceptional individuals have listened for what is important, and made the sound of liberty manifest in their own lives. On D-Day, 1945, as the troops were about to land at Normandy, Philadelphia Mayor Bernard Samuel struck the bell with a mallet, and the recorded tones were broadcast around the world. Speaking at Pointe du Hoc, forty years later, Ronald Reagan reflected what that meant to those that landed in France, and how faith sustained men like Colonel Robert Wolverton, who prayed with the troops before the landing and died soon after, and General Ridgeway, who meditated on the bible the night before. Speaking of those who fought at Poine de Hoc, Reagan said:

The Americans who fought here that morning knew word of the invasion was spreading through the darkness back home. They fought — or felt in their hearts, though they couldn't know in fact, that in Georgia they were filling the churches at 4 a.m., in Kansas they were kneeling on their porches and praying, and in Philadelphia they were ringing the Liberty Bell.

Something else, Reagan continued, helped the men of D-day: their rock-hard belief that Providence would have a great hand in the events that would unfold here; that God was an ally in this great cause. And so, the night before the invasion, when Colonel Wolverton asked his parachute troops to kneel with him in prayer he told them: Do not bow your heads, but look up so you can see God and ask His blessing in what we're about to do. Also that night, General Matthew Ridgway on his cot, listening in the darkness for the promise God made to Joshua: "I will not fail thee nor forsake thee." Reagan concluded by
saying Here, in this place where the West held together, let us make a vow to our dead. Let us show them by our actions that we understand what they died for. Let our actions say to them the words for which Matthew Ridgway listened: “I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.”

If we act accordingly, a bell of liberty once rung, no matter how seemingly broken it might be, can be heard generations later, if we do not fail or forsake the vision it embodies. And we gather together to honor the brave, eloquent, and determined men and women who have never failed or forsaken the message of the liberty bell, and who have never failed or forsaken the faith communities of America represented here this evening.

Becket has been a part of my own life for over a decade, and in preparing these remarks, I was trying to figure out how that happened. And so I investigated my email inbox, which took me back to 2012, to the “Affordable Care Act,” and the threat to religious freedom that its regulations posed. I received an email from the House Oversight Committee, explaining that they were seeking testimony from “religious leaders to highlight how the Administration’s actions will negatively impact the important spiritual and material work of religious institutions…Your name has been recommended to us by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty as the person we ought to seek out to present a Jewish perspective on this important matter.” And so, thanks to Becket, I went to testify.

The image of that hearing became a centerpiece of the presidential campaign, and a congregant in New York City began receiving postcards with my picture on it from their local representative, effectively denouncing me as an evil threat to the future of the country. Thanks, Becket Fund!!

But liberty endures and advances because those that say “no,” and because of those that have the courage to stand with them. In the face of this threat to religious freedom, the Little Sisters of the Poor came forward, and they found excellent lawyers to represent them. We hear a lot in demographic discussions about the rise of the “Nones,” n-o-n-e-s; those claiming no religious affiliation. But this was the real rise of the “nuns,” which by the way, sounds like an amazing movie- Little Sisters of the Poor: The Rise of the Nuns. I was honored to join the Becket Board at that time, and I will never forget the pride I felt when I received a call in the summer of 2014 to be told...
that Becket had won the *Hobby Lobby*, another case centering on this issue, and relief in the knowledge that the cause of liberty would not be silenced. I did not know, of course, then, that Becket would represent the educational institution for which I am so privileged to work, Yeshiva University, fighting for its God-given right to embody the religious values, *and* the educational engagement of the world, that its name embodies. It is a reminder that what affects one faith community affects us all. So many of us here tonight have similar stories, of how grateful we are that in this all-too noisy, all too-cynical world, Becket has stood up for us, and has not allowed the Liberty Bell to be silenced.

In synagogues around the world, the five books of Moses are read throughout the year, starting at Genesis, and concluding at Deuteronomy. As it happens, Jews this Sabbath will read the words chosen by Isaac Norris: *ukratem deror ba-aretz lekhol yoshveha*, proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof. In my own synagogue— itself a source of help by Becket—we have a tradition that once a year, when this verse is read, we adorn the Torah scroll with two silver bells that are replicas of the liberty bell, with the same verse inscribed it, only in the original Hebrew, the Hebrew that Isaac Norris knew. The liberty bells adorning the Torah scroll remind us of the way in which the Hebrew Bible inspired America, and the equality that Jews found in America.

This year, the symbolism is more meaningful than most. This has been a difficult period for the Jewish people; and even in America, where the Jewish experience has been so exceptional, antisemitism has reared its ugly head. But if I may speak personally for a moment, I draw strength and succor from the knowledge that those that hate the Jews in America hate America itself, hate the way it was inspired by Jewish scripture, hate that it is a nation dedicated to a creed with a covenantal calling, hate the way it is a covenantal people because from its very beginning, imperfectly yet exceptionally, it proclaimed liberty in its land, and to so many beyond. And if we wish to ponder the exceptional nature of this nation, we need only look to a bell that broke 150 years ago, but whose call has never been silenced. Writing of the verse selected by Isaac Norris, the historian Gary Nash reflects that “Little did Pennsylvania’s legislators know that these words from Leviticus would be the watchwords of generations to follow, in the United States and everywhere else in the world.”
And watchwords they remain. Thus, like the Pennsylvania legislature of 1751 we too mark a milestone of religious liberty. I was in Palo Alto several days ago, and met last year’s Canterbury Medalist, Michael McConnell. And Judge McConnell commented to me that the Becket Fund was one of the few organizations in America that has profoundly impacted this country in the last few decades for the better, without whom America would be very different. He was right. Because case by case, brief by brief, argument by argument, victory by victory, the lawyers of becket have steadily and steadfastly proclaimed liberty throughout this land- and they will not stop proclaiming liberty in this land until they have achieved it for all the inhabitants thereof.

And so we mark thirty years of the Becket Fund, in awe at all that has been achieved, and in the determination and realization that there is so much more to do. We may well ponder the jubilee year of Becket that will occur twenty years hence, when we too, like our predecessors in Philadelphia, will mark a fifty-year anniversary of the battle for religious freedom, fifty years of proclaiming liberty. I look forward to seeing you there—as we will gather, please God, to celebrate the many more victories for freedom that are yet to come.