

Ten years ago, famed Broadway composer Lin-Manuel Miranda somehow managed to convince America that the hottest ticket on Broadway should be a three-hour musical about, of all things, former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. A musical about the Federalist Papers, the national debt and the Compromise of 1790- riveting, obvious topics for a musical, for sure! But somehow, it worked.

And tucked between the cabinet rap battles and King George dancing around the stage, is one line that has stuck with me. George Washington turns to the young Alexander Hamilton and tells him: “*History has its eyes on you.*”¹ “History has its eyes on you;” it is an intimidating thought. Because Washington isn't simply telling Hamilton that someday people will remember what he did; he's telling him that this moment belongs to him now, and what happens next depends, at least in part, on what Hamilton chooses to do. Two hundred and fifty years after the founding of this country, perhaps those words are meant for us, too. History has its eyes on us, and what we do matters.

Every year on Yom Kippur morning, when we open our Torah scroll, we encounter a text that asks us to imagine ourselves in much the same

¹ Miranda, L. (2015). *Hamilton: An American Musical* [Album]. Atlantic Records.

way: as people standing in a moment of history, inheritors of a story that began long before us, yet ultimately responsible for what happens next. As we heard our readers chant just moments ago: “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*,”² “You stand here today, all of you.”

The Torah doesn't say merely, “*Atem Nitzavim kulchem*,” “you stand here, all of you.” Moses says: “*Atem Nitzavim **hayom** kulchem*.” “You stand here **hayom**, **today**, all of you.” Sinai happened generations earlier; the Exodus generation is gone. Yet Moses, speaking to the *next* generation of Israelites, insists that covenant is not something that happened only to their ancestors. Covenant happens **hayom**, today, to *them*.

For this is how Judaism understands revelation: as an inheritance each generation receives anew. Like at Passover seder, when we say that we went out from Egypt, we are meant to see ourselves in these stories. Moses isn't just talking to the people before him; he is talking to *us*, to you and me, right here, right now, **hayom**, today, in Overland Park, Kansas. And as we encounter Moses' call to action during America's 250th year, these words feel especially prescient.

² Deuteronomy 29:9

Every generation has to ‘stand at Sinai’ for itself. And perhaps the American 250th invites a similar exercise of historical imagination. We weren't at Independence Hall; we didn't write the Declaration, did not draft the Constitution. But we are the Americans standing here *hayom*, today. And the founders don't get to decide what America becomes in its third century; we do. We didn't just inherit history, a legacy; we inherit responsibility. We are the generations standing here **now**. And so, we must ask ourselves, as our country marks its 250th year, what does our American covenant demand of us?

This is a natural moment for a kind of national *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our nation's soul. After all, anniversaries, like Yom Kippur, invite us to take stock. They allow us to celebrate and give thanks for all that is good, while also demanding that we look honestly at where we have fallen short. Who have we become over these last 250 years? Where have we lived up to the ideals articulated at our founding, and where have we failed to make them real? And, perhaps most importantly, who do we still hope to be? Loving this country does not require us to pretend that America has always fulfilled its highest aspirations. In fact, I would argue the opposite: that one of the deepest expressions of patriotism is caring

enough about this country to hold it accountable to those aspirations, to take responsibility for the work still unfinished and to help America become more fully the nation it has always promised it could be.

This idea of responsibility should not intimidate us; Judaism speaks powerfully in the language of obligation. As Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein reminds us in his work *The Interaction Between Judaism and Democracy*, “The whole world of *halakhah* [Jewish Law] is based on the imposition of responsibility, a person's responsibility for himself, for his environment, for the society in which he lives. To be a Jew means to live with a very high degree of responsibility and obligation. Whereas the Western world talks a lot about rights [and individual needs] from the time of the French Revolution onwards, the world of *halakhah* [Jewish law] is built on a declaration of a person's obligation.”³

American democracy begins with the rights and liberties that belong to each of us. Judaism, then, in Rabbi Lichtenstein's reframing, asks us to take the next step: not only, ‘What am I entitled to receive?’ but ‘What am I obligated to give?’ Not only, ‘What does my country owe me?’ but, ‘What do

³ Lichtenstein, R. Dr. A. "Interaction between Judaism and Democracy?," in *Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State*, ed. Asher Maoz (Jewish Law Association, 2011), 313–321. Excerpts. (Originally from a speech he delivered in 2005)

I owe my country, my community, my neighbor?’ Like an echo of President Kennedy’s famed call, a Jewish understanding of citizenship cannot end with the freedoms democracy affords us; those freedoms create responsibilities: to participate, to speak, to listen, to pursue justice, to protect the vulnerable and to concern ourselves with the well-being of a society that extends far beyond ourselves.

In our Declaration of Independence, our founders wrote that Government derives “...their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁴ We tend to hear that phrase as a limitation on government, and of course, it is. Those who govern us possess power only because we, the people, have entrusted it to them. But hidden within that extraordinary right is an equally extraordinary responsibility. If government depends upon the consent of the governed, then **the governed cannot be passive**. Democracy requires something of us: our consent, our attention, our participation; our voices, votes, willingness to stand up for one another and, sometimes, our willingness to stand against the prevailing winds.

For us, as Jews, this responsibility carries particular weight. Because the strength of American democracy is not merely an abstract civic concern

⁴ United States. (1776). *The Declaration of Independence*. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. [<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>].

for the Jewish community; it has been one of the essential conditions that has allowed Jewish life in this country to flourish, that was apparent almost from the beginning. In 1790, the small Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island wrote to President George Washington, expressing their gratitude for a new nation in which they hoped Jews might finally live not merely at the sufferance of a tolerant majority, but as full and equal citizens. Washington responded with words that have echoed through American Jewish history ever since. The government of the United States, he assured them, “gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”⁵ Jews, he wrote, possessed the same “liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship”⁶ as their neighbors.

It is difficult, from our vantage point 236 years later, to appreciate just how radical that promise was. Jewish history had taught our ancestors what it meant to live at the whim of kings and rulers; to have their rights granted, restricted and revoked; to be welcomed when useful and expelled when no longer wanted. America offered something different, not perfectly, not consistently and certainly not without antisemitism and discrimination,

⁵ Washington, G. (1790, August 18). George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island [Letter]. *Founders Online, National Archives*.
[<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>].

⁶ Washington, *Letter*, 1790.

but different, nonetheless. Indeed, as historian Professor Pamela Nadell (who visited our community this past March) reminds us, antisemitism is itself an “American tradition,”⁷ present on these shores from the earliest days of Jewish settlement. American Jews have faced exclusion and quotas, conspiracy theories and social discrimination, vandalism and violence, this we know... Washington’s beautiful promise did not describe an America that had conquered bigotry; it articulated an ideal against which America would continually have to measure itself.

Yet, within this framework, American Jewish life has flourished, despite challenges and setbacks. We have built synagogues and schools and seminaries. We have published Jewish newspapers and Jewish books, established charities and advocacy organizations, spoken openly from our pulpits, organized around the causes our tradition calls us to champion. We voted, held public office, protested our government when we believed it was wrong and petitioned it when we believed it could do better. We have been able to be fully Jewish and fully American, not because every American has always welcomed us, but because democratic structures have given us the tools to resist hate; the very ideals embedded in our

⁷ Nadell, P.S. (2025). *Antisemitism, An American Tradition*. W.;W. Norton & Company.

democracy have made room for us. And when those ideals have fallen short of their promise, American Jews have repeatedly appealed to them, organizing, going to court, building coalitions and demanding that the rights promised on paper be honored in practice.

That is why things like religious liberty, equality under the law, freedom of expression, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, checks on political power and protections for minorities cannot be abstractions for the Jewish community. Jewish history has given us ample reason to understand how much they matter. The flourishing of Jewish life depends not upon Jews always being popular or powerful, but upon living in a society in which no community has to be popular or powerful in order for its rights to be protected.

Critically, we must understand that democracy, like Judaism, survives and flourishes only when each generation takes responsibility for it. As Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said, “The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned by each new generation.”⁸ Justice O'Connor is tapping into an

⁸ O'Connor, Jus. S.D. (Date Unknown). “Celebrating Civic Learning Week and Honoring Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.” Sandra Day O'Connor Institute.
<https://oconnorinstitute.org/newsroom/celebrating-civic-learning-week-2025/> (Accessed 7 September 2026).

idea we are all deeply familiar with: anything worth preserving *l’dor vador*, from generation to generation, must be worked for; faithful stewards in each generation must see themselves as critical links in an ongoing chain. America has survived, against tough odds, amidst division and turmoil, for 250 years. *We* stand here **hayom**, today, obligated, responsible: what will we pass on?

I know that can feel like a tall order right now. Because if democracy requires our participation, our attention, our willingness to engage, well, some days, frankly, it would be a whole lot easier to tune it all out. And apparently, we are not alone in feeling that way. A recent 2026 Pew Research Center study found that 52% of Americans say they are simply worn out by the amount of news these days, and 60% say they have, at some point, deliberately reduced how much news they consume. And yet, in that very same survey, 80% of Americans said that we have a responsibility to be informed about the news when we vote.⁹ Therein lies the tension. We know that citizenship asks us to pay attention. We know that democracy requires something of us. And at the very same time, many of us are exhausted by what paying attention feels like right now.

⁹ Eddy, K., Lipka, M., Eva Matsa, K., St. Aubin, C., Shearer, E. (2026, February 11) *Americans’ Complicated Relationship With News*. Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2026/02/11/americans-complicated-relationship-with-news/>.

But, as exhausting and divided as this moment feels, we should resist the temptation to imagine that ours is the first generation of Americans to wonder whether this whole experiment might come apart at the seams. Surely, a nation that literally went to war with itself was more divided than we are today. We Americans have lived through a Civil War and Reconstruction; through economic collapse and the Great Depression; through two World Wars; through the battles of the Civil Rights Movement, desegregation, assassinations and political violence, Vietnam and Watergate; through bitter fights over who counted as an American and who was entitled to the rights America promised. We have fought and protested and won and failed so many times. But we are still here; that is the American spirit, that is the American democratic project. As Jews *and* Americans, we are no strangers to wrestling; it is our sacred (admittedly, exhausting) privilege.

This moment calls us to action, to civic engagement, to stepping up for the future generations to come, to protecting our democratic institutions and values that should transcend any particular partisan concerns. It means voting in elections and not just the presidential ones; it means educating ourselves about the issues shaping our democracy rather than

settling for headlines and sound bites. It means knowing who represents us and making our voices heard. It means lending our time, our resources and our energy to organizations working to protect constitutional freedoms and religious pluralism. And it means having courageous conversations with our neighbors, especially those with whom we disagree, remembering that democracy is strengthened when informed citizens show up, speak up, listen to one another and remain committed to the common good.

Our Constitutional, democratic values, breathtaking in their genius, revolutionary at the time of their inception, must transcend this particular moment in time, must last for another 250 years. And that means we, ‘the governed,’ ‘those who stand here **hayom, today**,’ must act. As Rabbi Tarfon reminds us in our Mishnah: “It is not our duty to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.”¹⁰

Our ancestors stood at Sinai. Generations of Americans before us have stood at their own consequential moments in our nation’s history. And generations yet to come will someday inherit whatever we leave behind. But “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem.*” We are the generation standing here **today**... And from across the centuries, I can hear Washington’s call:

¹⁰ Pirkei Avot 2:16

Rabbi Caitlin Brazner | Yom Kippur Morning Sermon | September 21, 2026
“America at 250: We Stand Here Today”

[SING:] “History has its eyes on you...” History has its eyes on *us*; what will
we do with our moment?

Shanah tovah.