



## Good for America, Good for the Jews?

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Democracy promises to guarantee freedom and equality for all, yet Jews seem to be increasingly vulnerable in America today. How should Jews respond when they feel democracy is not showing up for them? On this episode of TEXTing IRL, **Elana Stein Hain** and *Slate* Senior Editor **Dahlia Lithwick** turn to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's 1984 letter on voting and Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt's eulogy for Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to probe the relationship between Jews and American democracy, especially in moments when the promise of democracy feels unfulfilled or even threatened.

*This source sheet is part of the **September 29, 2025** episode of the podcast **TEXTing IRL - Ideas for Real Life**. Host **Elana Stein Hain** sits down with guests who are accomplished practitioners in their fields to explore how classic and modern Jewish texts can help us wrestle with and act with integrity in the face of the big dilemmas of our time.*

**Elana Stein Hain** is the Rosh Beit Midrash and a senior research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, where she serves as lead faculty and consults on the content of lay and professional programs.

A widely well-regarded thinker and teacher, Elana is passionate about bringing rabbinic thought into conversation with contemporary life. To this end, she hosts [TEXTing IRL](#), a bi-weekly podcast that considers issues relevant to Jewish life through the lens of classical and modern Torah texts; she also teaches [Talmud from the Balcony](#), an occasional learning seminar exposing the big ideas, questions, and issues motivating rabbinic discussions. Elana is the author of [Circumventing the Law: Rabbinic Perspectives on Legal Loopholes and Integrity](#) (Penn Press, 2024) which uses loopholes as a lens for understanding rabbinic views on law and ethics.

She earned her doctorate in Religion at Columbia University and is an alumna of the Yeshiva University Graduate Program in Advanced Talmudic Studies (GPATS) as well as the Consortium in Jewish Studies and Legal Theory Graduate Fellowship at Cardozo School of Law. She also served for eight years as a clergy member on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, at both Lincoln Square Synagogue and the Jewish Center, has taught at the Wagner School at NYU, and sits on the board of Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts.

Elana is currently living in Jerusalem with her family.

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**Dahlia Lithwick** is an award-winning journalist and author, and Senior Editor at [Slate](#), having written their Supreme Court Dispatches and Jurisprudence columns since 1999. Lithwick also hosts [Amicus](#), Slate's award-winning weekly podcast about the law and the Supreme Court.

In 2018 Lithwick received the American Constitution Society's Progressive Champion Award, and the Hillman Prize for Opinion and Analysis. Lithwick won a 2013 National Magazine Award for her columns on the Affordable Care Act. She has been twice awarded an Online Journalism Award for her legal commentary. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in October of 2018. In 2021, Dahlia received the [Women's Media Centre's Exceptional Journalism Award](#), and was also presented a Gracie Award for [Amicus Presents: The Class of RBG](#).

Lithwick earned her BA in English at [Yale University](#) and her JD degree at [Stanford University](#), and has held visiting faculty positions at numerous universities. Lithwick was previously a Senior Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. Lithwick's recent book, [Lady Justice: Women, the Law and the Battle to Save America](#) became an instant [New York Times Bestseller](#).

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**1. George Washington, letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 18, 1790**

**To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island**

[Newport, R.I., 18 August 1790]

Gentlemen.

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington

**2. Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," 1883**

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

**3. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, letter, October 3, 1984**

On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety.

A fundamental principle of Judaism is hakaras hatov -- recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which guards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility of each individual is to register and to vote.

Therefore, I urge all members of the Jewish community to fulfill their obligations by registering as soon as possible, and by voting. By this, we can express our appreciation and contribute to the continued security of our community.

M. Feinstein

**4. Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, eulogy for Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, September 23, 2020**

Today we stand in mourning of an American hero, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. . . .

To be born into a world that does not see you, that does not believe in your potential, that does not give you a path for opportunity or a clear path for education, and despite this, to be able to see beyond the world you are in to imagine that something can be different – that is the job of a prophet. And it is the rare prophet who not only imagines a new world, but also makes that new world a reality in her lifetime. This was the brilliance and vision of Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The Torah is relentless in reminding, in instructing, in commanding that we never forget those who live in the shadows, those whose freedom and opportunity are not guaranteed. 36 times we are taught that we must never forget the stranger. 12 times we are told to care for the widow and the orphan. This is one of the most important commands of the Torah. It is the Torah's call to action.

And it is also the promise written into our constitution. As Justice Ginsburg said, and I quote: "Think back to 1787. Who were 'We the People'? They certainly weren't women; they surely weren't people held in human bondage. The genius of our Constitution is that now over more than 200 sometimes turbulent years, that 'We' has expanded and expanded." This was Justice Ginsburg's life's work: to insist that the Constitution deliver on its promise, that "We the People" would include all the people. She carried out that work in every chapter of her life. . . .

Nothing could stop Justice Ginsburg's unflagging devotion to this project, not even cancer. Justice Ginsburg, *mi'dor l'dor*, from generation to generation, we promise to carry forward your legacy. May you rest under the wings of the Shechinah knowing that you have tirelessly served us and this great country, the United States of America.

**5. Anita Hill, quoted in Dahlia Lithwick, *Lady Justice: Women, the Law, and the Battle to Save America*, 2022, pp. 211-12**

In an interview years later, I asked Anita Hill whether and when it was appropriate to give up on the legal system, to walk away and claim that it was a force for more harm than good. So many of the women in this book shrugged and told me that the law is an imperfect solution at best, but Anita Hill recoiled when I suggested as much: “Without law it’s chaos, right? Because we will lose. We will lose with chaos. We will always lose.” Perhaps more than anyone else she articulated the special relationship that exists by necessity between vulnerable communities and the legal system. “Chaos,” she told me, “allows for behavior you could not anticipate. With institutions, if you understand an institution, you know how things work. They may not work perfectly for you, but you know how they work. Chaos, you don’t know how it works, and it’s survival of the fittest. And people can really act on their worst instincts. That may be true, to some extent, in institutions. But there is something that you can navigate.”