



Jewish American Thriving

A Journey Through Text

INTRODUCTION

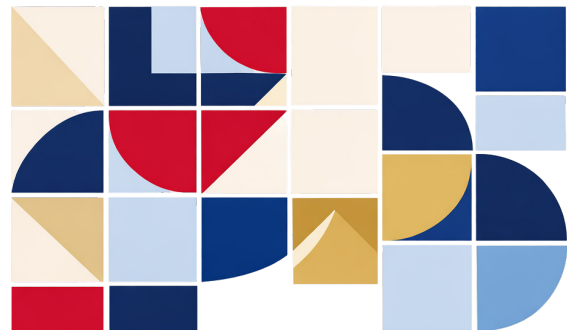
Jews have flourished in the United States of America since this country's early years. That is not to say that being a Jew in America has always been comfortable or easy; the lives of individual Jews have been shaped by many forces beyond their Jewishness, and American antisemitism has risen and fallen at different points in American Jewish history.

But overall, Jews have felt at home here in ways that would have been difficult to imagine in the past.

The liberal democratic ideals enshrined in the Constitution and expressed in our legal system—human equality, religious freedom, the separation of church and state, and others—are a good starting point for explaining what makes the American Jewish experience different from the history of all other Jewish diasporas.

Jews have always been equal citizens in America, not imperial subjects; they have not been shut out of government and other opportunities on account of their religious beliefs. Instead, we have enjoyed the rights of citizenship and fulfilled its obligations.

The impact of American pluralism extends beyond the law; it has allowed Jews, Judaism, and Jewish culture to thrive in America and made it possible for Jewish stories to become indelible parts of the American cultural mosaic.



INTRODUCTION (CONT'D)

As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the American experiment, many Jews are anxious about our place in America. Political and cultural polarization, the erosion of democratic norms, and the rise of a new wave of antisemitism give us good reason to worry.

It may well be true that the post-war Golden Age of American Jewry has ended. But despite the many ways America has fallen short for us and for others, its ideals and their great potential remain. At this moment more than ever, they require our affirmation, commitment, and investment for ourselves and for all Americans, out of gratitude for what they have made possible and with hope for the future they may yet allow to blossom for us, for other minority groups, and for all Americans.

Recounting stories of the past and reflecting on their meaning in the present and for the future are quintessentially Jewish ways to mark holidays and other important occasions. The Shalom Hartman Institute invites you to celebrate America's 250th in this way too.

The following Jewish texts and accompanying discussion questions serve as jumping off points for discussion—at the dinner table, in class, in a d'var Torah or sermon, or for your own personal reflection.

The texts tell a story through four sections:

- I. Democracy and Jewish Thriving**
- II. Expressing our Jewishness in America**
- III. At Home in America**
- IV. One Minority Among Many**

The sources in each section can be read altogether or individually—each one is rich on its own and can be framed in many ways.

As you move through them, we invite you to reflect on America as a home for Jews and to think about what we owe our fellow Americans, especially members of other minority groups.

We hope you will agree that democracy, pluralism, freedom, and equality deserve celebration, study, and commitment.



PART I. DEMOCRACY AND JEWISH THRIVING

In this op-ed, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute Yehuda Kurtzer argues that we must work to strengthen the American principles that have allowed Jews to flourish in America as equal citizens.

“Why Trump’s attack on democracy is as deep a Jewish concern as antisemitism or Israel” by Yehuda Kurtzer, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 3, 2025 (excerpt)

Our safety as Jews in America has long been best ensured by the mechanisms of fair governance. We thrived in America not because we received special treatment, but because we benefited from equal treatment; and we have a glorious history of American Jewish activism for those values to be normalized for all Americans, and not just for ourselves.

In contrast to most of Diasporic Jewish history, in which Jewish safety depended on the vicissitudes of the ruling class, American Jews leaned into the core principles of American democracy as vital instruments to keep us equal, protected, and safe among our fellow Americans.

We even went so far as to integrate what we saw as American ideas and ideals into our Jewishness, such that our American Jewish... commitments to liberalism and pluralism reflect a deep synthesis between American Jewish interests and our understanding of what America was making possible for us.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Yehuda Kurtzer contrasts the structure of American democracy with the unpredictability of diasporic Jewish history, when Jewish safety depended on the mood and interests of the ruling class. What are the benefits of relying on democratic systems for securing Jewish safety? Are there any weaknesses or disadvantages?

Why should Jews remain invested in liberalism and pluralism today? What are some ways we might express our commitment to democratic values and norms specifically as Jews?



PART II. EXPRESSING OUR JEWISHNESS IN AMERICA

This story from the Jerusalem Talmud (3rd-4th centuries) takes us back in time to ancient Alexandria at a moment when Jews there were living under the Roman emperor Trajan. It expresses a fear that Jews are being misunderstood by the majority culture in a way that could lead to disaster. Even though American Jews now live in a democratic system, the fear of being misunderstood still lingers.

Jerusalem Talmud Sukkah 5, 55b

נוֹלַד לוֹ בֶן בְּתַשְׁעָה בְּאָב וְהָיוּ מִתְעַנִּין.
מֵת בִּתּוֹ בְּחֲנוּכָה וְהִדְלִיקוּ נֵירוֹת.
שָׁלַח אֶשְׁתּוֹ וְאָמְרָה לוֹ.
עַד שֶׁאֶת מְכַבֵּשׁ אֶת הַבְּרַבְרַיִים בּוֹא וְכָבִישׁ אֶת הַיְהוּדִים שֶׁמְרִדוּ בָּךְ.

A son was born to him [the Roman emperor Trajan] on the 9th of Av and they [the Jews] were fasting [and thus appeared to be mourning the birth]. His daughter died during Hanukkah and they [the Jews] lit lamps [and thus appeared to be celebrating her death]. His [Trajan's] wife sent to [him] saying, "Before you conquer the barbarians [or: Instead of conquering the barbarians], come and conquer the Jews [of Alexandria] who are rebelling against you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

What could the Jews of Alexandria have done to avoid being misunderstood by Trajan?

Are there moments when you feel your Jewishness is misunderstood by non-Jewish friends and neighbors?
How do you handle those moments?



PART II. EXPRESSING OUR JEWISHNESS IN AMERICA



The next two pieces are from contemporary op-eds by different authors, both about Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro. We suggest reading them together.

In his memoir, Pennsylvania Governor Joshua Shapiro recounted the process of being vetted by the Harris campaign as a possible vice-presidential candidate in the 2024 election. He described being grilled about his connection to the State of Israel, a mode of aggressive questioning he felt bordered on antisemitic.

The first piece, by Michael Koplow, chief policy officer of Israel Policy Forum and a senior research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute's Kogod Research Center, argues that American Jews have not done a good enough job explaining their connection to Israel to the rest of American society.

In the second piece, Claire E. Sufrin, Director of Publication and Research at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, reacts to Shapiro talking about his Jewishness as his “faith” in interviews and in his memoir. She argues that although “faith” is not necessarily a good description of Judaism or the way that most American Jews talk about their Jewishness, this language can make it more comprehensible for non-Jewish Americans. She asks what it might look like for Jews to explain Jewishness on their own terms.

Both pieces encourage American Jews to maintain the practices, beliefs, and values that make them unique and also call upon us to do a better job of explaining Jewishness to the larger society to avoid being misunderstood.



PART II. EXPRESSING OUR JEWISHNESS IN AMERICA

“Josh Shapiro’s ‘dual loyalty’ story shows a gap between how American Jews see themselves – and how they’re seen” by Michael Koplow, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 28, 2026 (excerpt)

Israel is such a core part of Jewish identity historically, and the modern state of Israel such a touchstone for American Jews, that embracing it is for many American Jews a natural part of their ordinary lives, not only as Jews but as Americans....

Judaism is a blend of national, ethnic, religious, historical and cultural attachments; it is at the same time a peoplehood, a civilization, a religion and a tribe. Israel is a state that claims to not only be for its citizens but for Jews wherever they may be found. If it is hard for us to explain this complex web, imagine how hard it is for others to understand it.

The great blessing of this golden age of American Jewry has been feeling so comfortable and at home that we don’t question how others see us, as our ancestors had to. In a sense, this has allowed us to live outside of centuries of Jewish history. But we don’t need to go back more than one century to see that our predecessors were not quite so comfortable, and understood that they needed to more proactively make a case that we take for granted.

Antisemitism is not on Jews to fix; it is not “our” problem—it is the antisemites’ problem. However, doing a better job of explaining what goes into Jewish identity, how we relate to Israel and why there is no contradiction between the two halves of the term “American Jew” is on us.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Having to explain our Judaism to others can feel like an onerous burden. Why does Michael Koplow think it is necessary, especially when it comes to Israel and Zionism?

Have there been times when your connection to America and connection to Israel were in conflict? How did you manage that conflict, and what did you learn about yourself in the process?



PART II. EXPRESSING OUR JEWISHNESS IN AMERICA

“O ye of Jewish faith: Josh Shapiro for president?” by Claire E. Sufrin, *Times of Israel*, February 1, 2026 (excerpt)

Talking about one’s faith is a move an American Jew makes when they want their Jewishness to make them recognizable and relatable in our Christian country. [Josh] Shapiro is trying to communicate: because I’m Jewish, you can trust that I, like you, believe in God, I, like you, have solid morals and values, and I’m just like every other man thus far who has been president. For they all too had faith or at least knew how to talk about it.

American Jews have complicated feelings about Jewish politicians who speak openly about their Jewishness. When we hear them, we often experience another version of that combined sense of pride and fear that the arson attack last spring brought on for me. It’s a joy we call nachas (if we’re Ashkenazi) or nachat (if we’re Sephardi) in a fellow Jew’s accomplishment; it’s an anxiety about that accomplishment bringing too much negative attention and carrying too much risk.

It’s with that in mind that I can say I mostly look forward to the day when an American Jew is president. Even more so, though, I look forward to American Jews being known on terms we can define ourselves and not forcing ourselves into a box designed by someone else just to be recognized.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

How can Jewish Americans do a better job of explaining themselves to non-Jewish Americans? Why is this important?

Wanting to be understood on our own terms obligates us to understand others on their own terms. When have you been confused by or misunderstood someone else’s culture? What have you done to understand others better?



PART III. AT HOME IN AMERICA

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) was a descendant of Sephardic Jews who immigrated from Portugal to the United States around the time of the American Revolution. She wrote this sonnet, which is engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty, in 1883, not long after Eastern European Jewish immigrants began arriving in the US in large numbers (alongside many non-Jewish immigrants from other parts of Europe).

This wave of immigration, which continued until the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, brought almost 2.5 million Jewish immigrants to these shores and dramatically reshaped American Jewish life. In the poem, Lazarus offers a vision of America as a safe haven in contrast to the Colossus of Rhodes, an ancient symbol of military triumph and imperial power.

Many read her as making the Jewish immigrant experience into the American story.

“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, 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!”



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

What is Emma Lazarus’s vision of America? What parts of that vision feel realized today, and what parts still feel lacking?

If Emma Lazarus was alive today, what might her vision for America look like?

What is your own family’s immigration story?



PART III. AT HOME IN AMERICA

The Jews who immigrated to America around the turn of the 20th century quickly realized that this country was not the goldene medina they had imagined. But they still began putting down new roots and working to ensure a better future for their children, as earlier generations of Jewish immigrants had and as later generations of Jewish immigrants would also do.

In the text below, delivered when he was the president of the American Jewish Committee, Jacob Blaustein (1892–1970) describes America as a home for Jews. He was himself the son of an Eastern European Jewish immigrant, and it’s worth noting that this text is from a speech he delivered in 1950, after the Holocaust and about two years after the establishment of the State of Israel, which he supported.

“The Voice of Reason” by Jacob Blaustein, address to the American Jewish Committee’s Executive Committee, April 29, 1950 (excerpt)

We repudiate vigorously the suggestion that American Jews are in Exile. The future of American Jewry, of our children and our children’s children is entirely linked with the future of America.

We have no alternative, and we want no alternative.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Jacob Blaustein is expressing a sense of complete “at-homeness” and belonging in America. Do you agree?

Are there risks to thinking of America as our only home?
How can we mitigate these risks?



PART III. AT HOME IN AMERICA

American citizens have the right to vote in this country, but are not obligated to do so. Moshe Feinstein responds to the question of whether Judaism compels or obligates American Jews to vote in American elections. As you read his letter, notice the way he frames voting as *hakaras* [hakarot] *hatov*, which literally means “recognizing the good” and refers to the obligation to express gratitude found in Jewish tradition. Feinstein was born in the Russian Empire and emigrated to the United States in 1937.

Letter regarding the obligation to vote by Moshe Feinstein, October 3, 1984 (excerpt)

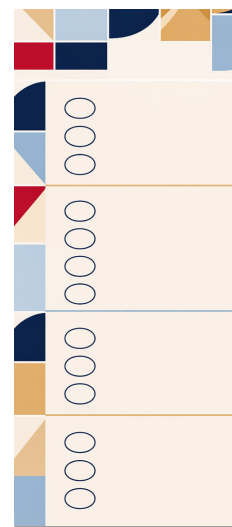
A fundamental principle of Judaism is *hakaras hatov*—recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which guards the freedoms we enjoy.

The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on 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.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Unlike some countries where voting is mandatory, in America it is a right but not an obligation. Do you vote? Why?

Moshe Feinstein is arguing that Jews must be grateful to live in America—and that expressing that gratitude is a religious obligation. What are other ways Jews can express gratitude for America?



PART IV. ONE MINORITY AMONG MANY

In the early 21st century, there was a growing call for Americans to reckon with the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its impact on this country's founding and growth. In 2017, Sharon Brous, senior rabbi and founder of IKAR, a Jewish congregation in Los Angeles, devoted one of her Rosh Hashanah sermons to this movement, arguing that American Jews should support reparations for African American descendants of slaves—a claim that our experience and history compel American Jews to work for the wellbeing of other minority groups.

“Our Country Was Built on a Stolen Beam” by Sharon Brous, Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5778 (2017) (excerpt)

A survivor of the Slonim Hasidic dynasty that was essentially wiped out in the Holocaust, [Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky] wrote that one who builds a home without investing in a deep and pure foundation will inevitably confront cracks on the walls and breaches in the structure....

At some point, no superficial adjustments will suffice, and the house will be in danger of collapsing. Eventually, the only solution will be to demolish the place, clean out the rotten foundation and build something new that is strong and healthy.

The question for us as Americans today is: what kind of house do we want to live in?...

Why am I talking about this today, on one of our holiest days of the year? Because the black community is taking the lead in this conversation, but it is simply immoral to leave the call for reparations to the black community alone.

We—Jews, people of faith, survivors and descendants of survivors of generational trauma—must join this conversation because it's decent and it's right. Because our destiny, as American Jews, is tied inextricably to the health and wellbeing of this nation, and right now our country is profoundly unwell. Because we know what it means to be on the receiving end of so much cruelty.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Although it has medieval roots, the phrase *tikkun olam*, which means fixing the world, is an expression closely associated with American Jews. Why does Brous think that Jewish history should compel us to build a better America for ourselves and others?

How does a commitment to social justice relate to your Jewish values?



PART IV. ONE MINORITY AMONG MANY

Joe Lieberman, an observant Orthodox Jew, was a United States Senator from 1989-2013 and a vice-presidential candidate in 2000. Here, his stepson Ethan Tucker, President and Rosh Yeshiva at the Hadar Institute, reflects on how, for Lieberman, Judaism and Americanness were intertwined and inspired his life of service.

“My stepfather Joe Lieberman set one path as a Jew in politics” by Ethan Tucker, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 26, 2024 (excerpt)

[Joe Lieberman’s] Judaism was also never partisan, and not just in the political sense. He saw his own destiny, as an American, to leverage his Judaism to accomplish things for others, for the broader world in which he lived, for the country he so deeply loved and to which he gave a lifetime of service. Nothing less than that would do—did Jews not bear witness to and serve the God of the world, about whom they say three times a day: “God loves all and has compassion on all God’s creatures?”

More than two decades, later, Jews surely feel more vulnerable than they did back in 2000. The horrific events of Oct. 7, rising antisemitism at home and abroad, political instability—these could beckon Jews, and perhaps Jewish candidates and their family members, in the public sphere to invisible or partisan forms of Jewishness.

Joe Lieberman would have beckoned us to something different. Archimedes, when musing on the laws of physics, is said to have remarked: “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.” My stepfather would have asked us to consider: What if Judaism were that lever and that fulcrum? What if we are the ones uniquely positioned to move the world through a deeper embrace of who we are?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

For Joe Lieberman, Judaism and his work as a politician were deeply connected. Are your own political or social views influenced by Judaism? How so?

What are the risks and rewards of allowing Judaism to influence or inform our politics?

When have Jewish practices, ideas, texts, or institutions “moved the world”? What does Ethan Tucker mean that we can move the world “through a deeper embrace of who we are?”

