

Shabbat Parashat Pinchas 5786
Rabbi David Englander
On July 4th

This Shabbat, as our country celebrates its 250th birthday, I want to begin in a very Jewish way: with gratitude for the American Jewish experience. We are always called upon to reflect honestly on how America has lived up to its promise and on the ways it must still strive to do so. But on this Shabbat, coinciding as it does with July 4th, it seems right for us first to be able to say, together and without hesitation: thank you.

Thank you to ancestors and patriots, soldiers and sailors, legal minds and fair-minded judges, elected and appointed officials across many generations, and all who helped build a country where Jewish life has not only survived, but grown and flourished. Thank you for a country where Jews have built synagogues, schools, camps, charities, businesses, seminaries, hospitals, and organizations of public service. Thank you for a country where so many Jews arrived with very little and built lives of dignity and opportunity. Thank you for a country where we could become fully American without giving up being Jewish.

And thank you to all who have helped make that possible right here in our own little piece of the American dream. As Beth El member and Federation President Ivy Brown Rovner wrote, "For generations, American leaders have strived to make our country a better place for future generations. Jewish communities have always been driven by the same imperative. Together, we have built enduring institutions, supported those in need, advocated for human rights, and contributed to every aspect of American society. There is no better example than here in South Jersey. Through philanthropy, volunteerism, and acts of kindness, we continue to help shape a stronger future for our own thriving community."

That local piece is worth emphasizing. It reminds us that the American Jewish story is not only told through famous names, historic documents, and national institutions. It is also told through congregations, schools, federations, social service agencies,

minyanim, hospital visits, volunteer committees, food collections, youth groups, summer camps, and all the everyday ways Jews have helped build community in this country. The American Jewish story is large, but it is also close to home.

In other countries and in other centuries, Jews were often allowed to live, but only with limits. They could live in certain places, work in certain fields, pay special taxes, or depend on the protection of a ruler who might change his mind. In some places, Jews were told, directly or indirectly, that they could belong only if they stopped being so visibly Jewish. America offered something different.

A recent open letter from Jewish leaders around the country said that America, unlike so many other countries in Jewish history, “did not merely tolerate Jewish life, but made possible its flourishing.” The same letter speaks about “the possibility of belonging without surrendering our identity.” That is one of the great blessings of American Jewish life. We could belong here without disappearing.

That promise was built into some of America’s deepest ideas. This country was not founded on one official religion, one monarchy, or one ethnic group. It was founded on ideals: liberty, equality, conscience, law, and the dignity of the individual. Those ideals have not always been fulfilled, and they have not always been extended equally. But the ideals themselves have given generations of Americans, including American Jews, something worth believing in and something worth working toward.

The Liberty Bell, still on proud display with the lines out the door to prove it just a few miles from here, carries a verse from the Torah, from Leviticus: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” In the Torah, that verse is about the Jubilee year, the Yovel, when people who had lost land or freedom were given a chance to begin again. It is not exactly the same as American democracy, of course, but it is still meaningful that one of the great American symbols of liberty carries the language of our Torah.

Even more basic is the Torah's teaching that every human being is created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. That idea does not answer every political question. It does not tell us exactly what every law or policy should be. But it does tell us where we have to begin. Every person has dignity. Every person matters. Every society has to be judged, at least in part, by how it treats the least among them. In the Torah's parlance, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. That is one reason American ideals resonated so deeply with Jews.

George Washington gave those ideals famous expression in his 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. He wrote that the government of the United States "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." And from the earliest years of the republic, Jews took part in American civic life. Some supported the Revolutionary cause. Some helped supply the Continental Army. Jews celebrated the ratification of the Constitution. Later generations served in the military, built businesses, taught in universities, served in government, created charities, advocated for justice, and helped shape American culture. American Jews helped shape America, and we are living proof that America helped shape American Judaism.

That is not a small matter for us. The way we organize congregations, schools, boards, committees, youth programs, social action projects, and charitable efforts is deeply influenced by American life. So is the confidence that we can speak and act publicly as Jews, not only for Jewish concerns, but for the broader good of the community. In America, Jewish life has often been at its best when it has been both proudly particular and deeply civic, rooted in our own tradition and also committed to the welfare of the society around us.

The gratitude we feel today does not mean pretending that everything has been good, for us or for other minority groups especially. It does not mean pretending that every person has experienced America in the same way. The promise of America was not fully available to everyone in 1776. Slavery still existed. Native peoples were pushed aside. Women were excluded from full political rights. Many immigrants and minorities faced

discrimination. Jews, too, have faced antisemitism in this country, from social exclusion and university quotas to violence against synagogues and the rise in hatred we have seen in recent years.

So the question is not whether America has been perfect. The answer is obviously no. The better question is whether America's ideals are still worth protecting and strengthening. I believe, and I'm quite sure you agree, that the answer is yes.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who I should note would not have been quoting us, as he had little use for non-Orthodox Jewry, but who was still one of the great halachic authorities of the twentieth century, understood this clearly. He came to America in 1937 after leaving Europe. Years later, in a letter urging Jews to vote, he wrote about *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good that has been done for you. Jews, he said, had found in America a safe haven, a country where the Constitution and Bill of Rights protected our freedom to practice Judaism and live in safety. Therefore, he argued, Jews had a responsibility to participate in democracy.

Because we are grateful, we vote. Because we are grateful, we serve or express admiration for those who do. Because we are grateful, we volunteer. Because we are grateful, we teach our children to care about this country and contribute to it. Because we are grateful, we try to make public life better, through humility, honesty, decency, willingness to listen to each other, and especially a refusal to demonize those who may see things differently.

The open letter from Jewish leaders I mentioned earlier ends with three short phrases: "Grateful are we. Committed are we. Hopeful are we." I like that ending because it does not ask us to choose between gratitude and responsibility. It holds them together. We are grateful because Jewish life in America has been blessed in ways our ancestors could hardly have imagined. We are committed because the ideals of liberty, equality, religious freedom, rule of law, and human dignity need to be renewed in every generation.

So on this 250th birthday of the United States, we pray: May God bless this country with wisdom, humility, courage, and compassion. May God help us protect the freedoms that have allowed Jewish life to flourish here. May God help us do our part to make this nation more worthy of its highest ideals. And may we, as American Jews, grow to be ever more grateful, committed, and hopeful, wherever we find ourselves engaged in the project of building communities and contributing to this amazing country, from sea to shining sea.