

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As Americans and Jews, and particularly, as American Jews, we're living in an unprecedented cultural and political moment. Myriad disputes rage on the policy front, but deepening cracks in our democratic norms and institutions transcend these debates and represent a genuinely existential threat to America.

As Americans, we should be gravely concerned about these phenomena.

As American Jews, we have even more at stake. Our vibrant American Judaism is a unique historical phenomenon—distinct from 15th Century Spanish Judaism or 18th Century Polish Judaism or 21st Century Israeli Judaism—that represents a hybrid of *Jewish* tradition and culture and the tradition and culture of *American democracy*. We may speak English, as opposed to Ladino or Yiddish or another amalgam, but our identity as American Jews is no less an intermingling of America and Judaism. As Louis Brandeis wrote in words that ring as true today as they did in 1916:

The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American. Not since the destruction of the Temple have the Jews in spirit and in ideals been so fully in harmony with the noblest aspirations of the country in which they lived.

American Judaism has evolved as an organic synthesis of both. Robust American democracy is as much a necessary precondition of—and enabling environment for—American Judaism as thriving Jewish life is. And it's not something we can take for granted, not least because history has shown us what too often happens when democracies destabilize.

While some early 20th Century Jewish institutions—American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, and others—saw the sustenance of American democracy as an essential part of the Jewish community's work, the last several decades have seen that commitment erode as Jewish priorities have become simultaneously more parochial and more global. This is a moment to revisit that commitment and to re-engage in collective Jewish communal action in support of American democracy and in response to the forces challenging it.

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We Jews have never been a culture of individuals operating in isolation. We're built on community: we learn in *chavruta*, we pray in *minyan*, we dance in circles, and we build communal institutions—the *beit kneset* and *beit midrash*, the JCC and Federation—in which we pray, learn, and act *together*.

In this remarkable country, we are engaged in a similar and historically unique experiment: whether people of all creeds and races, born in every country on this planet, can work together to create a more perfect union in which our collective good is realized, and we as individuals can thrive.

For Jews, this experiment has existential import. Throughout the diaspora, through all of our history, we've arrived as guests at someone else's table, tolerated perhaps, sometimes invited, but always at risk of expulsion. On these shores, there was no *ancien regime* to which we needed to appeal. Here, we're in the kitchen along with everyone else, co-creating the feast of what it means to be American.

“Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt

At its core, America elevates diversity and pluralism as intrinsic—not instrumental—values. We have struggled to live up to that vision since our founding, but the aspiration is in our DNA.

And that gives us as Jews a unique opportunity ... and a unique responsibility. As Dr. Jonathan Woocher (ז"ל)—the founding President of Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah—wrote, “America has been good to the Jews . . . In turn, Jews owe America not only their loyalty, but their active engagement in the process of America’s self-realization.”

Like Judaism, democracy requires a combination of both study and action—citizenship as a learned and practiced skill. As Justice Sandra Day O’Connor said, in words that ring with the Biblical, “The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned anew by each generation of citizens.”

Because democracy is not a spectator sport. And though American democracy has been remarkably resilient—in the face of slavery, corruption, Civil War, McCarthyism—it is not inevitable.

When we speak of what we want for our children, we easily tick off three hopes: to grow up confident and knowledgeable in their Judaism, able to succeed in the career of their choice, and capable of building and sustaining a loving partnership and family. To these three, it is time to return a fourth to its rightful place: to play an active part in the ongoing creation of this country.

We know there are many things on our to-do lists, so many needs competing for our attention, and here we’ve added another. But the work of building and sustaining this democracy is not just another goal for us, as Americans or as Jews; it undergirds them all.

Nothing less than the future of our democracy and the sustainability of the American Jewish experiment ride on whether we commit *to believe* in the aspirations at the heart of this country and *to lend* our voices, minds, hearts, and bodies to its continuous self-realization.

Since Caesar, Jews have wished for the good will of their rulers. In Czarist Russia, at least as

envisioned in “Fiddler on the Roof,” Jews quipped, “May the Lord keep the Czar . . . far, far away.” In the United States of America, for the first time in 2,000 years, we pray not for the good graces of capricious rulers, but for the sustenance of institutions that allow us and our fellow citizens to thrive.

Let no party schisms in state affairs prevail, so as to destroy the principles of the Constitution, which is for the security of person & property . . . May the Congress assembled, act in unison with each other to promote the welfare of all, and may they be able to deliberate and decide on all laws proposed for the advantage of their Constituents. . . . may the seminaries of education be continued under the direction of able Teachers & Professors, that the succeeding generations may gain the knowledge of freedom without licentiousness, & the usefulness of power without tyranny. May the people be convinced of the fidelity of their representatives, . . . May the blessing of Peace attend their Councils. . . And let us say, Amen.

These words that feel so contemporary were delivered at America’s oldest synagogue, New York’s Spanish and Portuguese, in the year 1805. It’s worth remembering that this moment in American history is not the first time we have been called to greatness. Now is our chance to roll up our sleeves and contribute in every way we can.

**With hope to join arm in arm with you as we work
for a better future for our people and our country,**

**Marcella Kanfer Rolnick, Founding Director and Chair
Aaron Dorfman, President**

