

Rosh Hashanah 5787

Celebrating America at 250: Judaism and Democracy

Can any of you, per chance, recall your Elementary School graduation? I have almost no memory of mine. I don't know if it took place in the gym or on the playground. I can't picture what I was wearing or who sat next to me. I do, however, have one crystal clear memory of that day: standing with my classmates and singing together. Revisiting this long-ago recollection, I can still sense my chest getting tight the way it does before I cry, except I'm sure it wasn't sadness — it was something closer to awe. I was eleven years old, and for about ninety seconds, I felt entirely, uncomplicatedly proud to be part of something larger than myself. It was my first and most meaningful experience with patriotism.

(Rabbi Amy Schwartzman sings)

*O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!*

I'm pretty sure that most of us can sing or at least hum this beloved American song. At first, we might understand it to be about our country's beautiful vistas – in particular, the postcard perfect view from Pike's Peak, where this song was penned first as a poem in 1893 by Katherine Lee Bates.

But look closer and it's clear that this song is even more about America's inner beauty, its moral fiber and its unending commitment to liberty, justice and equality. *America the Beautiful* is a sequel to our Founding Father's vision of our nation. It amplifies the aspirations of our Declaration of Independence as it, patriotically, in Bates' words, calls for "brotherhood, selflessness and nobleness." Or perhaps in our words today "unity, generosity, and respect."

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we celebrate America's 250th anniversary, it feels appropriate, it feels essential, perhaps even crucial for us to reflect on the intersection of the two dimensions of ourselves we bring to this day – our Americanness and our Jewishness. I find that intersection here, in the words of this song.

America the Beautiful begins by rejoicing in our country's natural beauty just as we gather today to rejoice in the creation of the world – God's gift to us - with all its majestic splendor, with all its shining potential and with its sea of challenges. Bates, in the later verses -which few of us actually know- goes on to name the very themes of our New Year observance: renewal, commitment, improvement and change. And in a shared grammar, she calls her generation of Americans to embrace the very values our tradition demands of us today: Tikkun Olam – repairing the world, tzedek – justice, and Hesed – Kindness. All of these are as essential to our democracy and to our America as they are to our Judaism and our Torah.

I would suggest to you that in *America the Beautiful*, Katherine Lee Bates gave us more than poem, and more than a song. *America the Beautiful* is a prayer. A tefillah, that, like all prayers, helps us communicate feelings that are complicated and difficult to express. A tefillah of vision and aspiration that is, as we are, 100% American and 100% Jewish. On this New Year, we pray, as we always do, for ourselves, we pray, as we always do, for our community and this year more than ever, let us pray for our country.

(Cantor Michael Shochet sings)

Oh beautiful, for Pilgrim feet, whose stern impression stress.

A thoroughfare of freedom beat across the wilderness.

America! America! God mend thine every flaw,

Confirm thy soul, with self-control thy liberty in law.

For all its uplift, the song that Katherine Lee Bates wrote was about a troubled America. It was the Gilded Age: rapid industrialization, a small elite growing wealthy while millions of workers and immigrants faced poverty, women without the right to vote, Indigenous people not yet citizens, Black Americans facing the rise of Jim Crow laws, a nation riven by corruption and partisan rifts.

In some ways, Bates' America echoes within our own. Each one of us here may see today's national challenges differently, but surely we all agree that our time is also one of political fractures and societal divisions, of both excess and poverty, an elite who wield an outsized influence and growing discrimination against minority groups including our own. 133 years after Bates wrote her beloved song, we remain a nation struggling to balance liberty and independence with justice and equality.

In 6th grade I had very little understanding of how *America the Beautiful* wrestled with this reality. While I was moved by the feeling and the shape of this song, I'm sure I didn't appreciate how it was, more accurately, a patriotic critique, giving us permission to love our country and to 'mend thine every flaw' all in the same breath.

7th grade was a special year for me as an American and as a Jew. It was 1976, our bicentennial, a summer (some of you may remember!) of festivals and pride — and the summer I turned thirteen and became a Bat Mitzvah. That year I learned that Bates, a minister's daughter, had folded our biblical vision of a just society into her vision of America. I sang the song again, but this time through a Jewish lens — I could hear the Torah, the Prophets, and my own Reform Judaism's call for social justice inside her words.

Now, 50 years later, *America the Beautiful* remains a song that can tighten my chest and put a lump in my throat. But my need to sing it has changed. This year the beloved melody carries less of my pride and more of my longing, perhaps even my fear.

Like Bates in 1893, I feel an urgent need to call Americans to infuse “brotherhood, selflessness and nobleness” into our country because the absence of these qualities has left me, and many within the Jewish community, feeling vulnerable, feeling unmoored, even unsafe. It is actually so much more than that. I see America's democratic principles,

established 250 years ago, changing, buckling, some even abandoned. Had she lived today, I wonder what Katherine Lee Bates would have scribed from Pikes Peak, from the Empire State Building looking out over New York City or from the Washington Monument gazing down on our nation's capital.

Some of you may feel a bit uneasy hearing me wade into what you may call 'politics.' Let me be clear: talking about Judaism — its values, its vision of society, the safety of its members — is political in the same way Torah is political, in the same way *America the Beautiful* is political. But this sermon is not partisan. Threats to our American liberties come from many places. And preserving American Democracy is the work of each one of us no matter what political lens we embrace.

You don't have to know every mitzvah or every page of Talmud to know that Judaism and democracy are not only intertwined but also interdependent. History is the most convincing teacher here. Consider your own history. Picture your family tree — yourself, your parents, maybe even your great-grandparents. Now count: how many generations separate you from a relative who did not live in a democracy? Picture that person, surviving in a society ruled by the whim of a Tsar or a dictator, where Jews faced state-sponsored persecution. For me, it's two generations. Two! And before that, nearly all my relatives — of our relatives — lived under that same tyranny of autocrats and despots.

The rare periods when our people lived in security and flourished, societies embraced principle and reason. Ironically some were autocracies, but the presence of democratic values gave our people agency. Think the Golden age of Spain, the Ottoman Empire's Millet system and the time of the French Emancipation.

But no other country in 2000 years of our Diaspora has treated Jews as well as America. While we have faced our own years of struggle, the vibrancy of America's democracy, its commitment to pluralism, the open exchange of ideas, its invitation for all people to participate fully in government and culture, for all to share in the work of figuring out what this country might look like, all of this and more, has allowed our Jewish community to not only survive here but thrive.

We know all too well that a country that abandons these core tenants, that devalues diversity and forsakes fairness, that usurps constitutional protections and undermines its judicial system, its free press or free speech is one that eventually turns hostile to everyone who depends on those norms for safety and stability, including us. Katherine Lee Bates held this truth to be self-evident; she felt them in her heart and named them in her song.

(Maya Nikolich, 11yo, sings)

*O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!*

America! America!

*May God thy gold refine, till all success be nobleness,
and every gain divine.*

Bates, an English Professor raised in a religious home, knew both the meter of poetry and the morals of the Bible. In her prayerful song, she articulates her belief that America's unfinished project is answerable to a sacred vision: a nation under God is a nation accountable to God. We, we the people, we are equally accountable to that vision, not only because we are Americans, even more so, because we are Jews.

Long before this country existed, our Torah, by no means a democracy itself, put out into the universe the just ideas this nation would one day use to create its representative democracy. Those ideas and the moral architecture they form, come from the Biblical covenant to which we are obligated- the very values we live by “when we lie down and when we rise up; when we are at home and when we go along the way.”

Consider the Declaration's best-known line: "All men are created equal." That is, of course, from our creation story — God forming each of us, equally, in the Divine image. The founders advocated for this vision (sadly) without actually living by it; their equality was only for some. Bates saw this same failure in her world. A society that values people

differently protects them unequally, rewards them disproportionately, grants rights unevenly. Let me assure you that from every corner of Jewish life — Orthodox or Reform, American or Israeli, secular or cultural — such inequality is immoral and unjust, and combating it is our duty, both as Jews, and as Americans.

If the founders leaned on Genesis, Bates, herself leaned on Exodus — her line "liberty in law" is the experience of our ancestors' trek from Egypt to Sinai, from enslavement to liberation. Our first action as a free people was to stand at Sinai and say yes to the responsibility of commandments- the laws. This story teaches that freedom is just and sustainable only when it is bound by a moral and legal framework protecting everyone equally.

But most of all, Bates brought into her song our prophets. Isaiah, Micah and Amos, who in our sacred language, asserted, as Bates rewrote, that the crown of any society is not power or economic gain but brotherhood, and the beating heart of every community is the nobleness seen in decency.

This is Judaism and this is America.

Democracy to Americans is like Torah to Jews.ⁱ

The Declaration of Independence to the American people is like the Shema and V'ahavta to our Jewish people.

We share the same language. We are bound by each other's stories. Our futures are intertwined.

(TRS choir sings acapella in harmony)

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years

thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!

America! America! God shed His grace on thee,

and crown thy good, with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea!

This past summer, I spent my sabbatical studying the intersection of Judaism and Democracy and returned time and again to this song. Feeling so connected to Katherine Lee Bates I visited her grave in Falmouth Massachusetts where she was born. She is buried with her family on a lane within the cemetery named in tribute to her. Red and white flowers surround her grave and American flags flank her headstone. There, I felt once again that 6th-grade-sense of patriotism, of belonging to something greater than myself, and wanting it to be good, to be better. *America the Beautiful* gives us permission to love our country and, in the same breath, to speak up when we see it turning away from its founding promise. Bates asks us, eloquently yet urgently, to confront what's at stake if we ignore that promise or turn away from the work of making it real. Will our next generation know the freedoms we know? Will they feel safe here? What will they experience when they sing this song?

I can picture Katherine Lee Bates on the top of Pikes Peak uplifted by the view but weighed down by the responsibility. She went on to spend the rest of her life confronting the very challenges we are living with today – equality, voting rights, citizenship, just institutions. She encouraged her students, her friends and neighbors and all of us who sing her song, to do our part, in any small or big way, to address the brokenness of our world by preserving our beloved, albeit imperfect democracy.

In my mind's eye of Bates on her mountain, I can also see the image of Moses, who stood on a mountain top as well, first to embrace the heavy responsibilities of our covenant, and then just before he died, to gaze out over a land he loved but would never enter.

Moses was gifted the view, not the possession.

Bates too looked out over a vast, unfinished country that was not yet, and still is not all that it could be.

She too had a vision.

Both of them, an American and a Jew, standing at a height, seeing farther than they could walk, holding a promise more than an arrival

This is where I want us to stand on this Rosh Hashanah. Seeing the beauty and the potential, committed to the divine blessing of liberty and justice. Answering the call to preserve the gifts of our founders. May every act of decency, every ounce of self-control, every reach toward a neighbor be our small repair of this beloved, unfinished country. May that eleven-year-old's ninety seconds of awe inspire our whole year's work.

America! America! God shed your grace on thee!

And crown thy good, with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea!

Amen – Shana Tova

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

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ⁱ Rabbi Malcolm Cohen “What should the flag symbolize” 2025