

Rabbi Joshua Beraha
America is Our Home
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Temple Micah, Washington, D.C.

Before America was our home, it was a shoreline.

In September 1654, twenty-three Jewish refugees came aground in New Amsterdam. They had been driven from Recife on the northeastern coast of Brazil and, as best we can tell, made their way north through the Caribbean.

They were not welcomed here.

Governor Peter Stuyvesant called them “repugnant” and “deceitful.” He wanted them gone.

But Jewish life took root anyway. The door Stuyvesant tried to *close* stayed *open*.¹

More than a century later, Moses Seixas of Newport’s Hebrew Congregation wrote to the new president, praising a government “which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”²

Washington wrote back, and adopted those lines as his own.³

And he added, religious liberty was an “inherent natural right,” not a favor anyone could grant or revoke.

Underneath that formal language was an old question, one Jews had carried from country to country, for centuries: Are we here because someone’s agreed to let us stay? Or are we here because we belong?

Washington’s answer was clear: You belong here, *by right*.

It was a promise that— America is our home.

If someone asks “what’d the rabbi talk about?” you can tell them: “He said, ‘America is our home.’”

¹ Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

² Moses Seixas to George Washington, August 17, 1790, “Moses Seixas’ Letter to President George Washington,” George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom.

³ George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 18, 1790, *Founders Online*, National Archives.

And now, I'm going to spend the rest of my time up here complicating that sentence.

The concept of home, or *bayit*, carries enormous weight in Judaism. The rabbis called a Jewish home a *mikdash may'at*, a miniature sanctuary. Home is where the *mezuzah* hangs. It's where Shabbat candles are lit, where Passover seders stretch past bedtime.

Even when we *leave* home, we carry its language with us. In Hebrew, a synagogue is a *beit kneset*, a *house* of gathering. A place of study is a *beit midrash*, a *house* of seeking.

Writer Diana Butler Bass put it perfectly: "Home is more than a house. It is a sacred location, a place of aspiration and dreams, of learning and habit, of relationships and heart. Home is the geography of our souls."⁴

Yes! The "geography of our souls"! A place becomes home when its story gets mixed up with ours, when its joys become our joys and its failures keep us up at night.

I keep thinking about God's first questions. To Adam: "Where are you?"⁵ To Cain: "Where is your brother?"⁶ Maybe that's the human condition? We need a place to stand (Adam), and people to answer for (Cain). That's home! Home gives us both, and that's, I think, what happened to us here.

We arrived carrying our own story of liberation. In our bones, from all the sacred stories we carried, we knew that freedom is just a beginning, that the real question comes after you leave Egypt: *how will you live?* And that's America! America was asking could a people freed from a king build what John Adams called "a government of laws, and not of men"?

That promise was betrayed by slavery. Still, Jews recognized the stakes: freedom is only as real as who gets to share in it.

And this is the part I don't want us to miss. Washington could put the promise on paper. The country still had to learn how to live it.

And as for Jews, we had to help make it true.

The historian Jonathan Sarna reminds us that most Jewish communities, throughout history, were never democracies. They were run by the wealthy and the learned. But here,

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World* (New York: Harper One, 2015)

⁵ Genesis 3:9

⁶ Genesis 4:9

congregations wrote constitutions and voted, borrowing the very practices of the democracy surrounding them.⁷

America was shaping us.

And we were shaping America.

Jewish immigrants opened shops, organized unions, entered the public school system, and argued cases in courtrooms across the country. Israel Beilin fled the pogroms of Russia, became Irving Berlin, and wrote 'God Bless America.' When you've fled the Cossacks, "my home sweet home" is a refugee's prayer.

Over generations, we raised children here, buried our parents here, served here, prayed here. We arranged the furniture according to our tastes and traditions, and, made things fit with our adopted American environment.

And— Americans borrowed greatly from *our design* in continuing to shape and reshape their big home.

Like many other immigrant groups—

*We built a home here. And it built us.*⁸ (Pause)

And that is why this moment feels like a fracture in the very foundation of who we are.

The home we built is still ours. But the walls are closing in. You think: I know this place. Why don't I recognize it?

We feel that estrangement as Jews.

Antisemitism. Or "Jew hatred," to use the more honest term.

Listen, I don't believe in the so-called lachrymose version of the Jewish story,⁹ the idea that we are history's perpetual victims, that we are the last generation, that's not who we are at Micah, and yet—

⁷ Sarna, Jonathan D. "Does the Torah Really Articulate Democracy's Fundamental Principles?" Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas, Summer 2026.

⁸ This echoes an old Zionist saying, "to build and to be rebuilt." The language has roots in Jeremiah 31:4

⁹ Salo W. Baron's critique of Jewish history as chiefly a story of suffering; see "Ghetto and Emancipation," *The Menorah Journal* 14, no. 6 (June 1928).

There's violence against Jews. Graffiti on our houses of worship. Conspiracies. Lies about Jewish money and power.

And then there are "minor" offences: a joke, a comment, an insinuation, (offered casually).

And this is one of the things that frightens me most, the way permission spreads (especially in an age of social media). One person says what was once unsayable in public. Someone repeats it, reposts it. Then someone says, "Well maybe they've got a point." New life is breathed into an old hate.

But we also feel the house crumbling as Americans.

The *protections* that make belonging *by right* possible are under strain: the rule of law. Equal citizenship. A free press. Free and fair elections. The principle that no leader stands above the law.

Take those protections away, and we're totally exposed to the division of the world into us and them, and to power that answers to no one.

So what do we do when the walls are closing in? That's the question this moment asks of us.

My answer: we begin with a well known Jewish *and* American idea: dissent (or refusals).

We refuse despair. We will not write the obituary of American Judaism while we're still alive to shape its future. (Golden Age of American Judaism over? No!)¹⁰ And, we refuse retreat. We will not lock the door and speak only among ourselves.¹¹

Despair and isolation are not welcome in this house.

God tells Abraham, "I will bless you," and then, וְהָיָה בְרָכָה, "Be a blessing." A blessing is meant to be carried on. And so— if American democracy has been a blessing to us, then we are called to become a blessing to American democracy.¹²

So here is where the blessing has to start: three homes, each needing our care.

¹⁰ Franklin Foer, "The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending," *The Atlantic*, March 4, 2024.

¹¹ Since 10/7, there has been a tendency of some Jewish organizations to turn inward. Temple Micah has never been about that. We specifically use the language of 'turning outward'. See Harwood Institute.

¹² Genesis 12:2.

First, our Jewish home. (Our *bayit*. Our *beit* midrash, our *beit* kneset).

At the end of *D'varim*, Deuteronomy, Moses renews the covenant not only with those standing before him, but also *וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם* “those who are not here with us today.”¹³

That’s us. The Torah held a place in line *for us*. Now, we inhabit that story.

How we tend to our Jewish home will look different for each of us. Some of us inherited a whole Jewish library. Some, a Jewish name, maybe, and a lot of unanswered questions. Or a recipe. One melody. Some are not even Jewish and *still* help build this life.

There are many doors. What matters is that we enter.

At Sinai, our ancestors famously said, *נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע*, “We will do and then we will understand.” Sometimes the *hands* lead, and the *heart* follows. So I suggest (humbly), light candles even if you’re uncertain what you believe. Learn a blessing. Come to Micah on an ordinary Shabbat, when there’s no shofar calling you.¹⁴

But, Temple Micah, we do this *not* because people hate us but because we love who we are!

Rabbi David Hartman once asked about Israel, but it applies here too, which story will organize Jewish life: Auschwitz or Sinai?¹⁵

The lesson of Auschwitz teaches why Jewish safety matters. Sinai’s about: Safe for what? What kind of life are we called *to build*?

We owe the dead our memory. But for our children? What will we pass onto them? We owe them more than survival. We owe them a Judaism worth living, one that has something to say for moments like we’re in right now, when power forgets its limits.

(As we’ve heard from this bimah before) The Torah tells even the king to keep the law near, so “his heart will not rise above his fellows.”¹⁶ And when David forgets that, Nathan walks into the room and says, *אַתָּה הָאִישׁ* “You’re the man.”¹⁷

No one is too powerful to hear the truth.

¹³ Deuteronomy 29:9–14

¹⁴ Exodus 24:7

¹⁵ “Auschwitz or Sinai?,” Jerusalem Post, December 12, 1982.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 17:18–20; Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 12:7.

The rabbis, it should be said, weren't anarchists. They taught us (in the Mishna) to pray for the welfare of government, "for without it, people would swallow one another alive." But they knew the other danger too: without limits, government does the swallowing.¹⁸

Democracy needs both. Power to protect the vulnerable. Law to restrain power. And Nathan, always, in the room.

But most of our lives are lived far from power. And Judaism meets us there, too.

When we're grateful, it gives us a blessing. Bless bread. Bless wine. Make a blessing on seeing a long lost friend. When our cup overflows, Judaism hands us a song and a dance. When the years run away from us, it hands us a calendar and says, here, mark the road. When grief empties us of words, tradition gives us... *verbs*. Verbs. *Tear* the garment. *Sit* low. *Open* the door. Let the house fill with people.

And when love for our children feels too big to hold, Judaism says: Place your hands upon their heads and let our ancient words say what your heart cannot.

This is our inheritance. An old home, lived in by generations before us.

Step inside. Learn where things are kept.

Then, open the door and carry this home with you into the wider world.

Because that door opens onto our American home.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote to Jews in exile: Build houses. Plant gardens. And then:

וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת-שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר

"Seek the well-being of the city."¹⁹

כִּי בְּשָׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שָׁלוֹם

"Because in its *shalom*, you will find your *shalom*."

The word is וְדַרְשׁוּ, seek, or pursue. Shalom will not arrive on its own.

This is why I think the Jewish project, and the American project, are not two stories, but one: our safety and this country's health rise and fall together.

¹⁸ Pirkei Avot 3:2

¹⁹ Jeremiah 29:4–7

Like, antisemitism *begins* with Jews. It never *ends* with Jews. Once any group has to ask permission to be at home, no one's home is secure.

Jews have always known this. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—HIAS— began by helping *Jewish* immigrants find refuge. In time, it helped refugees of every faith, a legacy carried on today by our own Sukkot Shalom, whose work in an age of ICE roundups and detention centers is the living embodiment of what our role as Jews must be in this moment.

And it's not only HIAS.

Rabbi Heschel marched with Dr. King in Selma, because America's promise could not be true for Jews and false for Black Americans. "In a free society," Heschel taught, "some are guilty, but all are responsible."²⁰

That sentence is also Torah. "Do not oppress the stranger" — וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר, "because you know the soul of the stranger." We know what it's like to leave home, and wonder whether another place will take us in.²¹

So, we defend the rule of law. We vote. We stand beside people whose dignity is threatened. And maybe hardest of all, we learn to share a country with people who see the world differently from us.

Tolerance is not what I'm talking about. Tolerance says, "Okay, fine, you're here. I'll mind my own business and you yours. End of sentence. Goodbye."

Democracy asks something much harder, "Will I defend your freedom even when I disagree with you?"

Rabbi Michael Holzman, just down the road in Reston, asks what a synagogue can do for democracy. His answer: Practice it. Study difficult texts. Disagree. Frustrate one another. And then return next Shabbat and pray together.²²

As Jews know well, *covenant does not equal agreement*. Covenant means that even when we disagree, we still belong. We stay in the argument. We make room for repentance and repair. *That's* what this season is all about. It's also what we can teach America, *as Jews*.

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 225.

²¹ Exodus 23:9; translation adapted.

²² Michael G. Holzman, "Can Synagogues Revitalize American Democracy?," Sources, Fall 2021, Sources Journal; Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation, "Rebuilding Democracy."

I already said what kind of *Judaism* I hope we place in our children's hands. Now I want to ask: what kind of *America* will we place there?

I want them to inherit a country where no one has to leave part of themselves outside the door. Where wearing a Jewish star necklace in public isn't a worry.

America is our home. Seek its peace.

And then, there is Israel. A *homeland*, not just a home. A relationship all its own.

I take courage here from one of the heroes of the American Jewish story, Louis Brandeis, who wrestled with this question a hundred years ago in 1915: could American Jews give themselves fully to this country, and still share responsibility for the Jewish future in Palestine?

His answer was, "Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent."²³

For Brandeis, Zionism *enlarged* Jewish freedom. A Jewish center in the ancestral land would strengthen Jews everywhere, including here. We served this country best, he believed, by bringing our whole Jewish inheritance with us, not by leaving part of it at the door.

Mordecai Kaplan gave that idea a name: *Peoplehood*. One Jewish civilization, one *Am*, stretched across Israel and the diaspora, each feeding the other.²⁴

I've always liked that word—*Peoplehood*. And I *do* experience the Jewish people as one big, complicated family, spread across continents and generations— a map drawn by migrations and expulsions, doors opened and doors slammed shut.

At any one of those turns, my family's journey might have led to the land of Israel. I might have built my life there.

But their journey led here. And here I built my life.

Israel is the homeland of the Jewish People. And America is my home.

Home is not a zero-sum word.

²³ Louis D. Brandeis, *The Jewish Problem: How to Solve It* (New York: Zionist Essays Publication Committee, 1915).

²⁴ For Mordecai Kaplan's understanding of Jewish peoplehood, see *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

I consider it a gift, and a task, that here, Judaism takes work. Rosh Hashanah arrives because we clear the day for it. Shabbat arrives because we set the table for it.

American Jewish life asks us to choose. What do we preserve? What do we put in storage?²⁵

That freedom is what's made American Judaism creative. Deliberate. And unmistakably ours. (Especially our *Reform* Judaism).

And— American Judaism belongs to a Jewish story larger than America, one that draws us into relationship with Jews whose lives are very different from ours.²⁶

Sometimes that relationship inspires us. Sometimes it breaks our hearts.

The rabbis gave that bond a legal image:

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֵבִים זֶה בָּזֶה²⁷

All Jews are responsible for one another

An *arev* is a guarantor— someone who signs their name to another's obligation, and is on the hook when something goes wrong. We've mobilized before for Jews persecuted around the world. Now we mobilize for their well-being in the homeland itself.

Because Theodor Herzl didn't imagine Zionism simply as a refuge for *some* Jews. He imagined it for the *whole Jewish people*, everywhere (even as a project for the entire world, or better, a society whose promise could reach beyond the Jewish people), which means that that same responsibility binds us to the Israelis in bomb shelters, and to the Israelis protesting their own government.²⁸

It also means telling the truth when the people entrusted with that responsibility betray it. A month ago, armed settlers—Jewish terrorists (so painful to say those two words together)—surrounded the village of Qusra, trapped a family in their own home, and walked away with no one arrested.

I don't tell you this to weigh it against anything else. Grief is *also* not a zero-sum word. I tell you because Herzl's Zionism, a vision for the dignity of an entire people, has no room in it for that.

²⁵ Storage image taken from Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (Yale University Press, 2012).

²⁶ Michael Koplow, "Judaism, Zionism, and the Promises of America," *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, Summer 2026, *Sources Journal*

²⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 39a

²⁸ Shlomo Avineri, *Herzl's Vision: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: BlueBridge, 2014)

If democracy needs a Nathan in the room, so does Jewish sovereignty!

Can we love our two homes at once?

Most of us don't vote in Israel. Most of our children won't serve in its army. That should make us humble about what we say. But humility still has a voice.

So *know* Israel. Go there if you can. Experience its remarkable zest for life. Commit to it, even knowing its failures.

Amos Oz once said, "I love Israel even when I cannot stand it."²⁹

I understand that kind of love because it's mine. I love Israel. Not uncritically, but wholly, and completely.

Sure, there's room in that love for disagreement.

And I know it's not easy to sit with a complicated love, or a love that never fully blossomed or maybe wasn't even there to begin with. Especially for some of our younger members—you've grown up watching this relationship at its most painful. (Growing up, I experienced the Israel of the 90s, post Oslo, but still singing songs for peace). You've seen images that haunt you. You've felt embarrassed, at times, to even say the word "Israel" out loud in certain rooms, let alone the word "Zionism".

I take that seriously. It's part of why a question a young woman asked me—December 2023— on the occasion of her bat mitzvah question, has stayed with me.

She wanted to know how she was supposed to be a *proud* Jew, given the images of Israel she sees.

My answer, in part, was: if not us, who? I don't fully know what that looks like in practice. But I believe Israel remains part of what it means to be a Jew. Struggling is a sign you're still in it.

So stay. Learn. Dissent. Help repair what is broken. Don't reject Zionism! Defend what must be defended.

As my teacher Rabbi Michael Marmur says of Torah study: "If all that happens is that my opinions are confirmed and my self-regard massaged, I haven't gotten beyond my own handbreadth."³⁰

²⁹ Amos Oz, quoted in Rob Eshman, "Love and Criticism: An Amos Oz Interview," *Jewish Journal*, May 13, 2015.

³⁰ Michael Marmur, *Living the Letters: An Alphabet of Emerging Jewish Thought* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 170–71; wording adapted.

That work—staying, arguing, holding discomfort—was never meant to happen alone. It's why we need this congregation.

Temple Micah, it is an honor to be a rabbi in this community. I look forward to the conversations—including the difficult ones—that will shape us in the years ahead.

When someone asks you what'd the rabbi talk about, you can say America is our home, and also he began a conversation about who we are, where we belong, and what Jewish future we will build together.

On Rosh Hashanah, we say:

הַיּוֹם הָרַת עוֹלָם

Hayom harat olam.

“Today the world is born.”³¹

One day, we will be the ancestors—among those “who are not here with us today.” The children whose heads we bless on Friday night will someday place their hands on the heads of children we might never meet.

They will inherit the Judaism we practice, the America we tend, and the relationship with Israel we build. They will live with what we do—and with what we leave undone.

I hope they can say we gave them a Judaism alive with purpose, an America worthy of being called home, and a Jewish people still bound together—from our home here to our homeland in Israel.

Hayom harat olam.

Today the world is born.

For a little while, its future is in our hands.

Temple Micah, let us choose life.³²

³¹ High Holy Day liturgy, “Hayom Harat Olam,” Rosh Hashanah Musaf service.

³² Deuteronomy 30:19