

250 Years of American Judaism: Fracture

Imagining the Israelites' flight from slavery, we identify at least one moment in history when our ancestors were moving in the same direction. It takes only two ingredients, however, for their unity and unanimity to disintegrate: uncertainty and fear. Across the Red Sea, Moses disappears up Mount Sinai. After 400 years under Pharaoh, going even 40 days without a leader, tyrant or not, is catastrophically unmooring. The Torah says - וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן they gathered *against* Moses' brother Aaron insisting he fashion another god.¹ And then, rabbinic tradition reveals they fractured. When Aaron removes the golden calf, one group makes sacrifices and dances before it. One group hopes the idol will serve as a leader on their journeys. And a third group, the tribe of Levi, rejects it entirely.²

Detecting apostasy, God urges Moses to descend. We read, "As Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them."³ As with death, heartbreak is invisible until we rip *k'riah* ribbons. When Moses smashes the law, he is grieving the first splintering of Am Yisrael. Freedom, it turns out, includes the freedom to abandon commitments, and to abandon each other.

Can we identify with our ancestors at all? With the idol-shaping, tablet-shattering despair that redemption doesn't guarantee covenant or cohesiveness? In countless ways, the founding of our more perfect Union was akin to the parting of the Red Sea. Here we were free from our country's first breath, and yet neither belonging nor safety were assured.

Anti-Semitism always surges during periods of instability. During the Civil War, Union and Confederate sympathizers accused Jews of disloyalty.⁴ Following economic downturns in the late 1800s, agrarian populists condemned us as a national threat, a corrupt class of international financiers who ruined family farms.⁵ When pencil factory superintendent Leo Frank was lynched

¹ Exodus 32:1

² *Da'at Zekenim* on Exodus 32:26, 12th- 13th century, trans. Elyahu Munk, Sefaria.com

³ Ex 32:19

⁴ Erin Blakemore "During the Civil War, Gen. Ulysses Grant Began Expelling Southern Jews—Until Lincoln Stepped In," History.com, 23 July 2019 [accessed 24 Aug 2026].

⁵ Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (University of California Press, 2006), 170.

by a mob in 1915, photos of his hanging corpse were sold as souvenir postcards.⁶ And xenophobia, quotas, conspiracy theories, and violence, whether veiled or brazen, have targeted us ever since.

American Jews have never agreed on how to stand against anti-Semitism. From the Bergsonites who begged in full-page newspaper ads to save the Jews of Europe to the discreet backroom appeals of Rabbi Stephen Wise; from outspoken Zionist communities lobbying for statehood to temples who abandoned the Reform Movement fearing accusations of disloyalty to America; from those who display their Judaism to those who don't, on this side of redemption, we persevere differently.

Today, our political diversity emerges from deep pain. Parties cater increasingly to extremists, deploying "the Jews" to justify defunding scientific research and denying essential support to our ally Israel. And there is dangerous dogmatism within Jewish life as so many of us build gateless fences around our ideals. The comfort of consensus has distanced us from the dialectic demanded by our covenant. We are off put by politics and off course in peoplehood.

Historian Simon Montefiore asserted in a recent interview that the roughly 75-year post-World War II era of relative global peace and safety was a rare "holiday from history."⁷ I agree only insofar as this applies to American Jews. For the generations who were born into a United States that treated Jews delicately, that folded our torment into school curricula, that looked upon us with pity as victims and/or admiration as survivors, this October 7 tide back into history is alarming. We are not prepared. Our fairy tale of an embracing America crumbles alongside the myth of a Democratic and Jewish Israel that ensures "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants."⁸ And in our yearning to fight for the souls of both nations, we feel keenly the limits of our power.

But unprepared does not mean incapable. And splintered does not mean broken. After smashing the tablets, Moses ascends Mount Sinai understanding Israelite vulnerability. Fear and uncertainty will always destabilize us; our covenant must account for human frailty and nurture forbearance for disagreement. The Red Sea might be the last place Am Yisrael moved in sync, but here we are more than 3,000 years later persisting differently and together, fractured but not fragile, and so fallibly free.

⁶ [Lynching of Leo Frank](#), Marietta, Georgia

⁷ Simon Sebag Montefiore, "[Our 'Holiday From History' Is Over](#)" *The Free Press*, 4 Feb 2025 [accessed 24 Aug 2026].

⁸ [Israel's Declaration of Independence](#)