

Renewal: What We Owe the Future

The Great Seal of the United States includes three Latin words: *E pluribus unum*. Out of many, one.

Those words are often treated as a call to unity. Yet they ask something more demanding than harmony. They imagine a people gathered from difference: many colonies and many convictions joined into a shared destiny without being erased into sameness. The goal was a republic strong enough to hold those differences and devoted enough to seek a common good beyond faction.

Unity can be a mood, a slogan, a moment when voices blend and conflict recedes. Being united is a discipline. Being united is the decision to remain bound to one another, and to a promise, when our failures remain real and our reasons for walking away have become persuasive.

That is the work of covenant. And that is the work of this night.

We stand before God tonight precious enough to be examined, flawed enough to require repair, and beloved enough to begin again. Judgment, in our tradition, is only the beginning of the work, but it is meaningless if it fails to inspire renewal and transformation. Casting blame takes little conviction. But choosing to be a person who continues the work of creation – that is the godly frame of this season.

So too with this country.

American Jews know the blessing of America in our bones. Here, with all the failures and exclusions of our history, Jewish life grew with a freedom our ancestors could scarcely have imagined. Here, we built synagogues and schools, hospitals and newspapers, movements and melodies, civic organizations and homes. Here, generations discovered that they could be heirs to Sinai and citizens of a republic, bearers of ancient memory and builders of a new world.

Cynicism sees the presence of failure and believes all value to be forfeit. Nostalgia sees the presence of blessing and views any critique as heresy. Covenant asks more of us. Because this country has given so much, we are obligated to help it become more fully itself.

Abraham Lincoln understood this kind of covenant. In 1854, when the nation's covenant was tearing under the weight of slavery, Lincoln turned again to the Declaration of Independence. He called Americans to “re-adopt” it, to return to first principles and align the nation's conduct with

its creed. Then he gave America one of the great descriptions of patriotic renewal: to make and keep the Union “forever worthy of the saving.”¹

Forever worthy of the saving. That phrase carries a philosophy of citizenship. It says that love of country can be fierce, clear-eyed, and humble. It says gratitude can become labor. Like Moses long ago, out of covenantal tablets broken by anger and fear, a new set was forged – a renewal of covenant.

Tonight, in America’s two hundred fiftieth year, those words return with force. A covenant renewed. And tonight, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of September 11, we know what such covenant may cost us. We know that a skyline can become a yahrzeit candle. We know that firefighters, police officers, rescuers, family, neighbors, and strangers can reveal the real weight of covenant: human beings bound to one another by courage, sacrifice, and responsibility.

Memory worthy of the dead must become responsibility among the living. So let this be our renewal.

We renew the covenant when Jewish life grows deeper, braver, more learned, more joyful, and more generous. We renew it when we refuse contempt as a civic language. We renew it when we take up the mantle of the generations before us who chose to be builders of this republic and founders of our future. We renew it when we teach our children that America is a promise to carry and a responsibility to make real. We renew it when they see in us a Judaism large enough to love this country gratefully, brave enough to name failings faithfully, and wise enough to know that blessing and brokenness have always shared the same human home.

Our generation will leave the work unfinished. Still, Rosh Hashanah asks us to begin again.

The covenant of America is unfinished. So are we.

And because it is unfinished, it is still alive. Out of many, may we stand united.

May we make it worthy of the saving. May we make ourselves worthy of its call.

¹ Peoria Speech, October 16, 1854;
<https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/peoriaspeech.htm>