

Yom Kippur Morning 5783: All of Us
Kehillath Shalom Synagogue
Rabbi Lina Zerbarini

Today's Torah reading speaks powerfully across the millenia:

You stand this day, all of you, before your God Adonai —your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, every householder in Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer — to enter into the covenant of your God Adonai, which your God Adonai is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; in order to establish you this day as God's people and in order to be your God, as promised you and as sworn to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

אַתֶּם נְצַבִּים הַיּוֹם כְּלֶכֶם

You stand today, **all of you**.

Who is the **all** of you?

The Torah, Moses, is very clear: leaders as well as those typically seen as having less power: women, children, foreigners, and menial laborers. All these people, every category, are a part of the covenant.

While Biblical Judaism is clearly not a democracy (God and Moses set out the rules – it's literally top down, from the peak of Mt. Sinai!), the values our tradition holds about human beings suggest that all voices must be heard.

The first chapter of Genesis tells us:
And God created humankind in the divine image,
creating it in the image of God—
creating them male and female.

The first humans were not Jews – they were just people. Not belonging to any tribe at all. And they were not men, either. This first chapter, the first

creation story, says that men and women were created at the same time. Equal. In the image of God.

And humans are infinitely valuable:

The rabbis teach that the first human was created as an individual (some say that the first human was created as one body, both male and female) so that we would know that “anyone who destroys a single life, it is as though they destroyed an entire world.” Were that first human to be killed, that would have been the end of humanity.

Today’s reading teaches inclusion: *You stand today, all of you.* Everyone is included in the covenant, everyone shares in its promises and responsibilities.

The rabbis tempered the top-down authoritarianism of the Torah when they taught that, while one voice spoke at Sinai, everyone received it differently, bringing their own life experience to what they heard. Including Moses. This radical midrash suggests that our Torah is not complete without the voice of each and every person. The Torah that we will raise shortly, and sing: *v’zot haTorah*, this is the Torah Moses placed before the children of Israel – is his Torah. It is incomplete without your own revelation, your own words.

These are very deep understandings about what it means to be a human in society. Everyone is holy, everyone is valuable, we need everyone’s voices, no matter their role or status. This is extraordinary wisdom, and one we should share with the world. *This* is what it means when Abraham is told that he will be a blessing, that all families on earth will bless themselves by the people he will become. Because we have teachings to share. And these values are not the values of our world or our country. Or, at least, they are not manifesting themselves now.

Democracy, government of the people, by the people, for the people¹, is threatened – in the world, and in the United States. Globally, in recent years more countries are becoming less democratic than more. And here in the US, election denial and disconnection of political leadership from

¹ Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

the majority of our population puts our democracy at risk. Two-thirds of Americans believe democracy is weakening in the US.

The lies about election fraud have led to increased voter suppression - which has a long history in our country. It is not new. The country was founded on very limited suffrage (white male landowners), and the Supreme Court's consistent chipping away of the Voting Rights Act since the Shelby decision in 2013 may keep the right in place, but is limiting the ability of people to exercise that right.

Two of our last four presidents did not receive the majority of votes. With the redistribution of population and the increasing geographic partisan divide, our Senate representation is less and less equitable. One resident of Wyoming has as much Senate representation as 6 voters in Connecticut, 7 in Alabama, 18 in Michigan, and 59 in California. And the US has 5 million citizens in territories who are unable to vote in federal elections. Many states eliminate voting rights for people with felony convictions, even after they have paid their debts to society.

What happens when not all voices are able to be heard?

Yascha Mounk, the German-Jewish (and now American) scholar of political science at Johns Hopkins suggests that "The scenarios by which we don't have a major democracy crisis by the end of the decade seem rather narrow." And he's not the only one. Steven Levitsky, of Harvard University, said: "It's not clear how the crisis is going to manifest itself, but there is a crisis coming. We should be very worried."

I am worried. I imagine many of you are, as well.

Kaplan knew democracy was not perfect, and that we had not yet achieved it in full form. But he believed that democracy's purpose is to have "justice and kindness instead of tyranny and cruelty prevail in all human relationships," and also that democracy seeks "to recover the

right of every human being to exercise the most divine power which he [or she] possesses, the power of reason."²

We only have to open the paper or listen to the news to wonder what happened to reason. Conspiracy theories and falsehoods in politics are not new, but the ease of spreading them is.

This summer, a new Jewish organization was created. Entitled "A More Perfect Union, A Jewish Partnership for Democracy," found online at <https://www.jewishdemocracy.org>, it brings together more than 80 organizations (including Reconstructing Judaism) to organize and mobilize the American Jewish community to protect and strengthen American democracy. Their goal is to support, convene, and mobilize the nearly 10,000 American Jewish organizations in a collaborative effort to ensure free and fair elections and to protect and strengthen democratic culture.

It has two priorities:

In the short-term, they are working to develop a coordinated, trans-partisan Jewish partnership to focus the community's power, resources, and support on ensuring that the United States remains an electoral democracy in 2026, when we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the nation's independence.

and

In the long term, A More Perfect Union seeks to focus on strengthening American democratic culture so that it fosters a shared sense of civic commitment and mitigates against toxic forms of political polarization. In order to build greater resilience among the public to the dynamics of toxic polarization and to reverse its growth, the United States must strengthen its democratic culture, its commitment to using the tools of democracy—organizing, voting, argumentation, negotiation, and compromise—to resolve vital public policy questions.

The two political scientists I mentioned earlier are among its Strategic Advisors.

² "Democracy and Zionism" in *Foundations of Democracy*, 1947

Why a Jewish Partnership for Democracy? As far back as the Revolutionary War, the Jewish community has organized and advocated for a vibrant democracy that represents the will of the people while protecting the rights of individuals and minorities. We are increasingly a trans-partisan community but have 20 centuries of a tradition of argument “for the sake of heaven,” disagreement that respects the humanity of the other and brings Jewish wisdom to bear on vital issues.

On Rosh HaShanah evening, I spoke of how Moses reminded God who God was. Here, in our portion, he is reminding his community who they are. That they are a community of all sorts of people. And that they all stand together. And that they all count. All of them.

Atem nitzavim. You stand today, all of you.

And we, our role, is to remind the world what it might be. Our gathering, our prayer, and our fasting, is for the purpose of renewing in us our hopes and dreams. Rekindling the vision and the values we seek to manifest in society. Since Isaiah, Jews have imagined a better world, and believed it was achievable. That we could create it.

The rabbis' placement of the reading from Isaiah as our Haftarah emphasizes this. Mordecai Kaplan wrote: “Whatever ought to be, can be, even though it is not at present in existence.”³ I pray that our gathering today will inspire and energize us to rebuild this world.

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

³ Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, 1975 printing, p. 80