

How Jewish Values Can Help Us Fix American Democracy

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This year the Jewish calendar and the election calendar have aligned in a very special way. My favorite political holiday—National Voter Registration Day—happens to fall during the Jewish “days of awe” between Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur.

On National Voter Registration Day, democracy enthusiasts across the country hold celebratory voter registration drives to recommit themselves to the work of welcoming new voters to the democratic process. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jews across the globe reflect on their actions of the past year, set their intentions for the next one, and recommit themselves to work of living lives infused with Jewish values and traditions.

I’ve spent my entire professional life, since a hot summer registering voters in Baltimore eleven years ago, devoted to making our democracy more welcoming, accessible, and inclusive. My work has included helping large institutions use technology to connect people with key voting information, working with researchers to identify psychological barriers to voter participation, and helping organizations across the country coordinate their efforts to improve our democracy.

Recently, I’ve been reflecting on how my experiences and values as a Jew have inspired and animated my work on democracy. And so I want to use this auspicious alignment of calendars as a moment to share a newly released talk I gave this spring about how I feel Jewish traditions and values can inform our efforts to transform and improve American democracy.

We need to talk about this because America has only been holding elections for 229 years.

America has only been having elections including non-landowners for 161 years. America has only been having elections including women for 97 years. America has only been having elections with the protections of the Voting Rights Act that functionally included many African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans in our democracy for the first time for 52 years. America has only been having elections including 18 - 21 year olds for 46 years. America has only held 56 presidential elections since George Washington was picked in 1788!

Our country has very, very limited practice holding elections, and especially limited practice holding elections that at least nominally include the entire adult population. Judaism, on the other hand, has persisted for 2,500 years. And it’s persisted because we’ve continued to refine and perfect rituals like the seder that have stood the test of millenia and sustained our people in the face of challenges from displacement and persecution, pogroms and holocausts.

It's natural that America would not have perfectly refined its civic rituals around elections after just 229 years. But the persistence of the American project depends on our ability to channel the creative spirit of the ancient rabbis, learn from our experience with elections each year, and upgrade the ritual of elections over time to help all Americans find themselves in the American story.



In this talk, I share some examples from the Jewish texts and rituals that can help us engage some of the fundamental challenges and tensions facing American democracy today. How do we create a culture that values shared learning and knowledge while also valuing the contributions of newcomers without that knowledge? How do we assess the quality of community rituals and improve them year after year so that they can adapt to new contexts and remain effective tools for future generations?

I hope you'll watch the talk and reflect a bit on your own answer to these questions. I'd especially love to hear from folks of different faith traditions and cultural backgrounds. You can reach me at sam@fcleadership.org. Shana Tova (Happy New Year!) and Happy National Voter Registration Day to all!