

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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As America turns 250, American Jews embrace a complicated patriotism

Rabbis, historians and communal leaders told JI that the nation’s semiquincentennial offers an opportunity to celebrate America’s promise while confronting its shortcomings

By Gabby Deutch

In the run-up to America’s 250th anniversary, the Jewish community finds itself navigating a best-of-times, worst-of-times, head-spinning paradox — standing nervously between the promise of an ideal America and the peril of today’s America.

In conversation after conversation, Jewish thinkers who spoke to *Jewish Insider* about this unique moment expressed fear and concern about the increasingly precarious situation facing American Jews in one breath. In the next, they spoke glowingly about the unique gifts this country’s democracy has given to the Jews who live here.

In spite of this deep ambivalence, or perhaps because of it, the Jewish community is all-in on the 250th.

As one might expect of the city that arguably jump-started the American Revolution, no expense or antic is being spared to celebrate the country’s birthday in Boston. At the Esplanade, a park along the Charles River, comedian Jane Lynch is emceeding an

evening of festivities that will feature musical performances by several Grammy winners. A revolutionary-themed drone show will be followed by a massive fireworks display with an orchestral accompaniment, all live-streamed on CNN. Revolutionary War re-enactors will, naturally, be on hand. (And playing the bugle.)

In the nearby suburb of Newton Center, Rabbi Benjamin Samuels of Congregation Shaarei Tefillah is devising a memorable July Fourth celebration, though without the theatrics that typically accompany the holiday. Independence Day falls on Shabbat this year, so the usual hubbub and pyrotechnics will be inaccessible for Orthodox Jews like Samuels who do not drive, cook or use electronics on the Jewish Sabbath.

Shaarei Tefillah congregants can expect something a little different. They will enjoy a July Fourth barbecue, though without the open flame; all the food will be grilled the day before and kept warm overnight. Brandeis professor Jonathan Sarna, the preeminent historian of American Jewish history

and a member of Shaarei Tefillah, will deliver the sermon at Saturday morning services. Any kids who join their parents at synagogue will get a red, white and blue ring pop.

Samuels has lately spent a lot of time considering what it means to be a patriotic American — in particular, a patriotic American Jew — at a moment when large parts of the American Jewish community feel as though they are under attack. He recently edited an entire issue of an Orthodox journal, *Tradition*, on the topic.

Antisemitism is at levels not seen in generations. The future of the Jewish state has become a political lightning rod that is increasingly a decisive, and divisive, issue in major political campaigns. Eight in 10 American voters believe democracy in America is being threatened, according to a recent Georgetown University poll.

It’s a fraught time for American Jews to be throwing the country a 250th birthday party. Or, at least, it would be easy to think that.

But conversations with nearly two dozen rabbis, writers, historians and Jewish leaders from across the political and religious spectrum reveal a shared sense of hope in the American project — and a belief that this milestone semiquincentennial celebration presents a unique opportunity for American Jews to hold their heads high and reflect on what this democracy, even if flawed, has given to them.

“I think it’s the right thing to be patriotic and participate in a celebration,” Samuels told *JI* recently. “For all of us who put an Israeli flag, or a ‘We stand with Israel’ poster, or a blue or yellow ribbon around our light post the past few years, put an American flag on your lawn. Every synagogue should have a program on July Fourth, which is on Shabbos this year, dedicated to the American Jewish experience, and celebrate the semiquincentennial.”

Anyone who steps outside their house on July Fourth is likely to stumble upon one of the hundreds of celebrations of America’s 250th anniversary that will take place in neighborhoods, downtowns, boardwalks, parks and military bases across the country. They’ll be hard to miss; in Washington, the annual fireworks show on the National Mall is expected to use 40 times more fireworks than in typical years.

Some Jewish thinkers believe American Jews have a particular obligation to engage with this anniversary not just as Americans, but as Jews.

“An anniversary is a good occasion to put things in historic perspective. As bad as things may feel in the moment, they’re still pretty great relative to the bulk of not even just Jewish history, but also American Jewish history,” said Franklin Foer, a journalist at *The Atlantic* who wrote a provocative cover story two years ago arguing that the “golden age” of American Jews is ending. “All the ways in which Jewish values and American values are not just compatible, but overlap and extend one another, is something that I think is really important to cultivate within American Jewry and within American Jewish education.”

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said he expects many Reform rabbis to address the 250th in their sermons this week.

“I think we’re renegotiating what it means to be a person of deep Jewish faith and a person of deep American patriotism. How am I going to make those not just co-exist but really strengthen each other? And I think that’s the big question for this 250th,” said Jacobs. For his part, he drafted a lesson applying a Haftarah reading from the Book of Isaiah to the Fourth of July, and used it to raise questions about the legacy of slavery in this country.

Rabbi Michael Holzman, who leads Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation, created an interfaith initiative called Faith250 that inspired dozens of synagogues to study America’s foundational texts with the rigor that Jews usually apply to Torah study. At Boca Raton Synagogue, in Florida, Rabbi Efreim Goldberg devoted the congregation’s all-night learning program on Shavuot in May to a series of classes about the past, present and future of Jews in America. (The final class, about spirituality in the U.S., did not begin until 5:00 a.m.)

Every bunk at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin will be spending Shabbat on July Fourth doing age-appropriate learning on the theme of being Jewish in America at the country’s 250th, including exercises in writing their own prayer for the country. (Only English will be used on July Fourth at the camp, which usually sprinkles in Hebrew words for summer-camp words like “cabin” and “lake.”) Members of Keshet Israel, a synagogue in Washington, D.C., will lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on July 5th.

The idea behind all of this is to get people to engage deeply with what it means to be American, an exercise they may be more used to doing in a Jewish context.

“When you ask people, ‘Tell me about your American identity,’ they have a hard time answering the question,” said Rabbi Charlie Savenor, executive director of an organization called Civic Spirit, which helps faith communities promote knowledge of civics. He visited Ramah Wisconsin to help organize the Fourth of July programs.

“If I asked you that question about your Jewish identity, would your answer come quicker? 99% of the time people are like, ‘Yes. Passover, Seder, Shabbat. My bar or bat

mitzvah.’ You name it, they’ve got something to say,” Savenor continued. “Part of what’s happened is that the American Jewish community — this ranges from unaffiliated all the way to Orthodox — has really invested the energy that we have a stake in this thing that we call Jewish life. And how much you choose to participate, at least you have some sense of where you fit into that picture. But America, which has become so divided and polarized — what it means to be American today has become somewhat confusing.”

Uncertainty about what it means to be an American in 2026 is hardly just a Jewish concern. 77% of Americans say that the signers of the Declaration of Independence would be disappointed in how the country has turned out, according to a Gallup survey. 53% of American adults say they are very or extremely proud to be American — down from 81% a decade ago and 85% in 2006, Gallup found. Educators and politicians often lament the decline or even death of civics education, though Harvard professor Danielle Allen recently argued in *The New York Times* that, after slumping a decade ago, civics education is on the upswing.

“An anniversary is a good occasion to put things in historic perspective. As bad as things may feel in the moment, they’re still pretty great relative to the bulk of not even just Jewish history, but also American Jewish history,” said Atlantic journalist Franklin Foer.

Rising political polarization complicates Americans’ feelings about how they relate to the country and how, or whether, they feel proud of it. And on top of that, a bipartisan, congressionally funded project to celebrate America’s 250th was sidestepped by President Donald Trump in favor of a more partisan effort called Freedom250.

“I think there has been an increasing linkage between patriotism and partisanship. There’s a sense that if the president I like is in office, then I’m patriotic, and if the president I don’t like is in office, that I’m less patriotic,” said Tevi Troy, a presidential historian and former senior official in the George W. Bush administration.

Chanan Weissman, who leads the institute that publishes the journal *Sapir*, argued that a crucial project is to figure out how to “recreate the value of nonpartisan patriotism, as challenging as that may be.”

“A flag should not connote a party. It should connote a people. And more than any other group, the Jews should be advancing this,” said Weissman, who served in the Obama and Biden administrations. “We have to make sure that America is not just good for the Jews, as we say, but good for the type of place that a Jewish community can live and thrive and flourish in.”

At 2% of the population, Jews are not going to solve the major education-policy debates in this country, but there is a burgeoning push to help American Jews better understand the ideals and history of this country, and to do so as Jews. Organizations including A More Perfect Union, which promotes democracy as a Jewish value; the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, a pluralistic Jewish education center; the Tikvah Fund, a right-leaning “ideas institution”; and Pardes, an English-language pluralistic yeshiva in Jerusalem, released source materials about America250, often putting Jewish texts and values in conversation with America’s founding documents.

“Civics education has declined pretty considerably, so it’s not even like this is what you learn in your civics classes,” Hartman President Yehuda Kurtzer told JI. “It has definitely declined as a notion of something I’m supposed to specifically learn as a Jew, that I’m actually responsible as a Jew for this place, for America, and I’m responsible to think about my commitments to America as a Jewish imperative.”

A collective recognition seems to be emerging that this major anniversary, coming as it does at a moment of challenge for American Jews, might actually present an opportunity for renewal, and for reclaiming a common narrative: that this country belongs to the Jews as much as it does to anyone else, but only if they don’t give up on it.

“When Benjamin Franklin was leaving the Constitutional Convention, he was asked by somebody, ‘What kind of government are we forming?’ He says, ‘A republic,

if you can keep it,’” said author Dara Horn. “To me, the important word of that sentence is ‘you.’”

A republic is built on the premise that its core rights belong to every citizen equally. Religious freedom, pluralism, full citizenship in a representative democracy — these are values that, while not always fully realized for all Americans, have been the North Star that allowed Jewish life to flourish here.

“Having known the weight of persecution and exclusion, Jews recognized in America’s founding ideals something rare in human history: the possibility of belonging without surrendering our identity,” a group of Jewish leaders, including the heads of several major organizations, former U.S. ambassadors and a number of prominent academics, said in an open letter marking America’s 250th.

“This is not toleration,” said Elliott Abrams, a longtime Republican foreign policy official. “Jews have the same rights as everyone else. This goes back right to the beginning.”

In 1790, President George Washington traveled the country after the Constitution was ratified. Following his visit to Rhode Island, he received a letter from the leader of Touro Synagogue, in Newport, explaining that Jews should have the same rights as other religious groups in America. Washington was so moved that he responded immediately in a now-famous letter espousing his belief in the principle of freedom of religion, including for Jews.

“May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid,” Washington wrote, referencing the Book of Micah. One year later, the Bill of Rights — cementing religious freedom as a core American right — was ratified.

What followed was not a straight line. Slavery undermined the universal values of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and Jim Crow undercut the promise of emancipation. Jewish immigrants escaping pogroms in Europe came to America in massive numbers in the late

19th and early 20th centuries, marveling at the Statue of Liberty as they arrived at Ellis Island, before a jingoistic Congress severely cut back on immigration a century ago. In the 1920s and 1930s, as Nazism progressed in Germany, public figures like Father Charles Coughlin and carmaker Henry Ford spread antisemitic messages to the American masses on the radio and in the newspaper.

“This isn’t the first time that the country has been through an era when it seems not to be living up to its principles,” said Jamie Kirchick, a journalist who has published books about democratic backsliding in Europe and state-sanctioned discrimination against gay people working in the government. “I think that it’s just important to maintain an understanding and a belief in those principles.”

Sarna, the Brandeis historian, put it simply: “In America, we have very short memories.”

“Look at the persecution of German Americans in World War I, or Japanese Americans in World War II. But they recovered. The same was true in the 19th century when Catholics were so mistreated, and now look today at the vice president. So when you look at the long term, there is a lot of reason for hope,” Sarna told JI. “I don’t know that I personally will live to see it, but looking further ahead, I could see things change pretty rapidly, and we will look back and be embarrassed at some of what’s going on.”

Still, just because antisemitism and hatred have existed in America since before its founding does not make this particular revival any more palatable.

“I do think that we have responsibility, while being grateful and feeling responsible, to participate, advocate, vote, do civic duties and so on, but also realize that the lot of the Jew in exile is to constantly sleep with one eye open,” said Rabbi Efreim Goldberg, an Orthodox rabbi in Florida, offering a skeptical rejoinder.

Horn, the author, said she is often cast as the “prophet of doom,” having warned of modern antisemitism even before the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks on Israel and the ensuing war

in Gaza touched off the current wave. But she knows that title doesn't tell the full story.

"Think about the 150th anniversary of the United States, 100 years ago. 1926. Think about the situation of the Jewish community in America then. Pretty crap," Horn said. Congress had just, essentially, closed the borders. Ford was spreading *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. "It didn't magically go away. It's not because people were so good ... and they rejected hate. That's not what happened. This is the height of the [Ku Klux] Klan. What happened was American Jewish activism."

That's the message Horn has for the high school and college students she addresses regularly. Lean in even further to the civic pathways on offer in this country. Run for office. Speak up. Change things. The most important attribute, she tells young people, is courage.

"I think it's a human instinct to say, 'Well, we should just hunker down with our people, because that's who we feel comfortable with.' My message is no, no, we should not do that," said Shuly Rubin Schwartz, who retired as chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary this week. "Thank God we are citizens. We can use our leverage here. We have the right to protest, we have the right to vote in the people that we want, and we have the opportunity, always, to be building bridges with others."

Rabbi Goldberg, at Boca Raton Synagogue, offered a skeptical rejoinder, citing a Talmudic teaching about being both respectful and suspicious. "I do think that we have a responsibility, while being grateful and feeling responsible, to participate, advocate, vote, do civic duties and so on, but also realize that the lot of the Jew in exile is to constantly sleep with one eye open," said Goldberg. American University historian Pamela Nadell called this duality "the paradox of the American Jewish experience."

In the three years since Oct. 7, the old canard of dual loyalty has come to the fore in American politics with a renewed vigor. An anti-Israel political movement that has been building for years is now making a dent in American politics, pushing the argument that supporters of the Jewish state are driven by the malign influence of a for-

eign nation and, thus, are insufficiently American. The vast majority of American Jews still maintain a connection to the state of Israel, so one question that Jewish leaders are considering is how to make sure that young Jews are taught to fully inhabit both identities.

Nina Cohen, a history teacher at the Frisch School, a Modern Orthodox day school in New Jersey, developed a course on citizenship and belonging to dig into that tension.

"The 'dual loyalty' accusation assumes a zero-sum relationship between Jewish identity and American citizenship," Cohen wrote in an article last year in Hartman's *Sources* journal. "Jewish high schools must teach students to recognize and navigate multiple loyalties — to family, faith, community, nation, and Jewish peoplehood — as a civic strength that enriches democratic participation rather than undermines it."

The promise of America, according to Jack Lew, a former treasury secretary, U.S. ambassador to Israel and chief of staff to President Barack Obama, requires that Jews not be forced to make that choice, or even to see it as a choice.

"We should be teaching people to be proud of being Americans, and proud of being Jewish, and proud to support Israel as a Jewish democratic state," Lew told JI. "Those things, if they become choices, undermine the 250 years of progress and success."

Lew devoted his career to public service, a path that he recognizes was only made possible because his grandparents and his father came to this country from Europe to create a new and better life for their children.

"I think that transition in one generation, from arriving not speaking a word of English to having a son, a child, who can serve at the highest levels of government, is an American story," said Lew, who is now a professor at Columbia University.

Anne Neuberger, who served as a deputy national security advisor in the Biden administration, argued in a *Sapir* essay titled "The Jewish Case for Public Service" that raising one's hand to serve their country is the best antidote to antisemitism.

"Rather than walking away, we should be investing our hearts, our intellects, and our labor into making this nation the sanctuary it was always meant to be," Neuberger wrote. "Every young person should be encouraged to think seriously about how he might best contribute to that sanctuary."

For Rabbi Scott Klein, his sanctuary is wherever his soldiers are. As a U.S. Army chaplain at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, his job is to advise soldiers, most of whom are not Jewish, on ethics and morality; when their unit has to jump out of a plane, for instance, he is right there with them, providing spiritual guidance.

As Klein prepares to celebrate 250 years of America with his soldiers and the local Jewish community in Fayetteville, N.C., he thinks the ethos of the Army offers a useful teaching for all Americans — Jewish and otherwise — at a moment that, for some, feels less celebratory than strained.

"I think that the military remains one of the very few places where Americans from every zip code, background and belief system live, train and bleed together, and it proves that pluralism isn't a source of weakness," Klein said. "I hope to remind the Jewish community in the nation that religious freedom is not a passive luxury. It's actively defended."

"Rather than walking away, we should be investing our hearts, our intellects, and our labor into making this nation the sanctuary it was always meant to be," said Anne Neuberger, a deputy national security advisor to former President Joe Biden. "Every young person should be encouraged to think seriously about how he might best contribute to that sanctuary."

Twelve years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, when the gunpowder of the Revolutionary War had cleared and the American experiment was still very much an experiment, something momentous happened: the Constitution was ratified. The document that laid out the governing structure of American democracy would, at last, be implemented.

The streets of America filled with parades of citizens cheering on the occasion. The Grand Federal Procession, the

country's official celebration, took place in Philadelphia on July 4, 1788. The spiritual leader of Congregation Mikveh Israel, a Philadelphia synagogue that still operates, marched arm-in-arm at the parade alongside one of the best known ministers in the young country.

A feast was laid out after the parade. One of the tables was filled with kosher food — pickled salmon, bread, almonds, crackers and raisins. The full and enthusiastic inclusion of Jews in the festivities to ring in the ratification of the new Constitution marked a small, if meaningful, inflection point for religious minorities.

“That symbolizes it to me: We always want to be American, fully American, embracing our role as citizens, our privilege and responsibility as citizens,” said Shuly Rubin Schwartz, the former JTS chancellor. “And we want to do so proudly as Jews.” ♦

JUNE 18, 2026

‘The single best diaspora experience’: Jewish leaders mark America’s 250th with open letter

The letter urges American Jews to ‘double down’ on civic values as the country marks its 250th

By Haley Cohen

As the U.S. approaches its 250th anniversary, American Jewish leaders have signed an open letter expressing gratitude to a nation “unlike so many others through Jewish history [that] did not merely tolerate Jewish life, but made possible its flourishing,” while also highlighting Jewish contributions to the country’s founding.

“From the earliest days of the American experiment, Jews were drawn to the promise of a nation founded not on bloodline, monarchy, or established religion, but on liberty, covenant, and the dignity of the individual,” the letter reads. “Having known the weight of persecution and exclusion, Jews recognized in America’s founding ideals something rare in human history: the possibility of belonging without surrendering our identity.”

The letter continues, “Here, Jewish immigrants arrived with little and built lives of dignity. Here, Jewish communities established synagogues, schools, charities, businesses, and institutions of civic life. Here, Jews rose not because success was guaranteed, but because freedom made striving possible.”

The letter was spearheaded by David Bernstein, CEO of the North American Values Institute, and Phil Darivoff, chairman emeritus of the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, to increase American Jewish involvement in America 250 celebrations.

“America 250 is an opportunity to express gratitude to America, the country that’s been the single best diaspora experience that Jews have ever had,” Bernstein told *Jewish Insider*. “American Jews have been an integral part of this country and its story from the very beginning and we want to remind our fellow Americans of that.”

“It’s also an opportunity to ensure that America lives up to its founding ideal,” continued Bernstein. He asserted that America’s core civic values, such as freedom of conscience and the rule of law, “are the best defense against antisemitism,” which reached historic levels in America following Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks in Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza.

“It’s incumbent on the American Jewish community to double down on those values, both because they protect us and because they allow America to live up to its highest potential,” said Bernstein.

The letter also acknowledges America’s shortcomings, noting, “America has not always lived up to its own ideals. Its history is marked by acts and periods of injustice, exclusion and failures that wounded many communities, including at times our own.”

It concludes with a call to action for American Jews.

“At a time of division, distrust, and fragmentation, we recommit ourselves to strengthening the bonds of citizenship, renewing a culture of democratic responsibility, and modeling a patriotic pluralism that makes room for deep difference within shared national purpose. We also commit ourselves to teach these values to our children and our children’s children.”

“We are proud to contribute to helping America more fully realize the promise of a more perfect union.”

Inaugural signatories include William Daroff, CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League; Ted Deutch, CEO of the American Jewish Committee; former Rep. Kathy Manning (D-NC); and author Dara Horn. ♦

Shalom Hartman Institute's Beit Midrash for America offers a 'more complex form of patriotism'

With events, podcasts, guides, educational materials and a special journal, the U.S.-Israeli Jewish think tank explores how Jews changed America and vice versa

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The Shalom Hartman Institute's celebration of the 250th anniversary of America will last an entire year, seeking to answer a single question: How does the story of American Jewish success intersect with thousands of years of Jewish wisdom to inform how American Jews tackle today's challenges and imagine the years to come?

"The way that we are encouraging people to answer that question is to recognize the uniqueness of the American situation, to recommit to American ideals, democratic ideals in particular," Claire Sufrin, director of research and publication at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "[Democratic ideals] made our success possible. They're goods in and of themselves, and they're necessary for the future. We're really drawing on the idea that these are attitudes and investments that have to be cultivated and renewed. We can't take them for granted."

The yearlong program, titled Hartman Beit Midrash for America at 250, launched earlier this month and will include in-person events, podcast episodes, holiday guides, educational resources and a special issue of Shalom Hartman's *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, to coincide with July's semiquincentennial.

"The 250th is a moment for reflection on American Jewish life, American Jewish thriving, and also on America itself and what Jews owe America," Sufrin said.

The program is aimed at Jewish leaders, community members, educators and "anyone who wants to use Jewish wisdom, Jewish text, Jewish history in this moment for thinking about what it means to be an American Jew," Sufrin said.

Programming has three interconnected subthemes: the contract between American Jews and America, in which both sides have obligations and promises; the ways Judaism and American values shape one another; and the importance of Jews showing up in public spaces — outwardly as Jews — to advocate for the Jewish community, for other minorities and for democratic ideals.

Even with antisemitism skyrocketing and many claiming that the golden age of American Jewry has ended, echoing journalist Franklin Foer, "We're asking people to take a step back, take in a bigger picture of the American Jewish experience, to recognize, on the more negative side, that antisemitism has ebbed and flowed throughout American Jewish history, and also to recognize the many ways in which we are thriving in this post-golden age situation, compared to other moments in Jewish history, other places around the world right now," Sufrin said.

As part of the program, Shalom Hartman partnered with A More Perfect Union: The Jewish Partnership for Democracy to create a 30-page book titled *American Jewish Civics*, offering ways to strengthen democracy through Jewish teachings.

The book takes on an air of "gratitude," Sufrin said, pointing to a 1984 letter written by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who had served as the rabbi of Luban in Belarus before fleeing to America due to antisemitism. Feinstein implored the American Jewish community to vote as a way of fulfilling the Jewish principle of *hakaras hatov*, recognizing the good, and showing appreciation to America for the opportunities it provided the Jewish people.

When some people think of being a patriot, they envision cheerleaders for the country and all its actions, good and bad,

Sufrin said, but "part of what Hartman is trying to put forward with this *Beit Midrash...* is a more complex form of patriotism. I keep using the word commitment, and that's really at the heart of what we're teaching. It's not a love without criticism. It's not a refusal to see the bad parts. It's actually a call to really look most at the bad parts and see what you can do to make a difference and make a change."

The special issue of *Sources* includes contributions from historian Jonathan Sarna; Michael Koplow, the chief policy officer of Israel Policy Forum; and Deborah Barer, a Hartman Institute senior faculty member.

Sarna's piece, "Does the Torah Really Articulate Democracy's Fundamental Principles?" ponders if the Torah is the source of all democracy.

"Many of us grew up basically being told that everything that's wonderful about America is actually Jewish or it came from us," Sufrin said, but Sarna argues that the influence goes both ways. America, he says, also shaped Judaism.

Sarna explains that Jewish leaders began emphasizing American ideals, such as equality and democracy, around the American Revolution. Jewish institutions created constitutions because America did. *Tikkun olam*, although the phrase has medieval roots, became distinctly American Jewish, evolving into a way of life for many American Jews. Koplow's piece, "Judaism, Zionism and the Promises of America," makes the case "for Jews not to retreat, not to pull out of mainstream American society and go back into little Jewish enclaves, but instead to remain invested and also to do a better job of explaining ourselves, of explaining our sense of connection to the State of Israel, of explaining what it means to be Jewish, what it means to us," Sufrin

said. To do that, American Jews need to clarify these answers to themselves first.

Barer's piece, "Towards a Covenantal Citizenship," asks the question: How do you love the country that disappoints you?

Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said that initiatives like this are the reason her organization often partners with Shalom Hartman. "This initiative reminds us that questions of democracy and pluralism are central to both our tradition and our history. At a time when extreme voices are telling us to

choose between Jewish safety and democracy, it's vital to remember that's a false choice — and that we must fight for the democratic norms and institutions that have been inherent to Jewish advancement and security."

The initiative needs a full year, Sufrin said, because "The things we're asking people to do take a long time... We're asking them to really be reflective about the ideas that we're putting forward, to talk about them in community, maybe to build community around them. We want [American

Jews] to test our ideas in their local situations, see how they play out, and to build and strengthen relationships, to really think deeply about their own American Jewishness. That's a big project."

Hartman Beit Midrash for America at 250 grows out of the work the institute does every day, she said. "On July 4, 2027, we're not going to drop it all and say the year is over, we're done. This is a serious interest and serious commitment." ♦

MAY 14, 2026

White House call leads to numerous Shabbat 250 commemorations taking place in D.C.

Many Jewish Trump administration staffers are expected to attend the White House's official reception in the Indian Treaty Room

By Emily Jacobs

Washington, D.C., will be buzzing with events on Friday evening bringing in Shabbat 250, a national Sabbath marking the 250th birthday of the United States.

Several Jewish organizations have been planning celebratory gatherings, both in Washington and across the country, to commemorate Shabbat 250 since President Donald Trump encouraged Jewish Americans to observe Shabbat this weekend in his Jewish American Heritage Month proclamation.

The proclamation marked the first time a U.S. president had called for a national Shabbat, prompting some Jewish leaders to rush to organize events.

"There will be a number of events taking place around town for Shabbat 250," Rabbi Levi Shemtov, the executive vice president of American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad), told *Jewish Insider*. "In observance of the Sabbath, I'll need to walk everywhere, so I hope to make it to as many gatherings as possible."

Shemtov said the message he's taken from his conversations with fellow Jewish leaders going into this weekend is one of

gratitude toward the president for including the national Sabbath in his JAHM proclamation and of hope that the venture would prompt more Jewish Americans to keep Shabbat.

"I'm obviously delighted by the president's call to observe Shabbat, because this reinforces Jewish identity with Jewish observance and tradition. I hope those who don't yet observe Shabbat will choose to do so, and those who already observe will choose to share with a friend who doesn't yet know about this beautiful cornerstone of our heritage," Shemtov said. "I would imagine that those Jewish people who were in America 250 years ago could not have imagined our good fortunes today and must be kvelling."

"Some Jewish leaders have said that much like Shabbat gives us a break from the week for renewal and recalibration, their hope is that this Shabbat will be a moment of reprieve from partisan political battles for even just one day," he continued.

The most difficult ticket to snag is the White House's official Shabbat 250 reception, which is slated to take place at 6 p.m. ET in the Indian Treaty Room. While

Trump and Vice President JD Vance are not expected to be in attendance, Trump administration staffers have been invited to and are expected at the gathering.

Several invite-only dinners are taking place around D.C. after the White House event concludes and before sundown on Saturday. Details for many events are being kept under wraps due to security concerns.

One of those receptions is being co-sponsored by the American Association of Jewish Lawyers & Jurists and the Combat Antisemitism Movement. The gathering, titled, "Shabbat 250 Dinner: A Celebration of the President's National Sabbath," will feature a "family style" Sabbath meal and an afterparty dubbed "Farbrengen 250," according to an invitation obtained by *JI*.

An event organizer described the gathering to *JI* in a statement as an "off-the-record dinner" bringing together "Jewish members of the administration, Capitol Hill staff, media and policy professionals in celebration of the president's National Sabbath." The organizer told *JI* that guests will receive "the usual *kippot* and benches" and copies of Charlie Kirk's book on Shabbat. The wine served at the event will be

donated by Psagot Winery, the Israeli vineyard located in the West Bank.

“We were incredibly moved by President Trump’s call for a national Sabbath as part of the USA250 commemorations,” Arie

Lipnick, advisory board chairman of the Combat Antisemitism Movement, told JI in a statement. “In that spirit, CAM is excited to help bring together more than a hundred Jewish members of the administration, Hill

staff, media and policy professionals in celebration of America and Shabbat.” ♦

MAY 14, 2026

After Trump proclamation, Jewish groups scramble to plan ‘Shabbat 250,’ even as some have concerns

Some Jewish organizations — mainly Orthodox and conservative — hail the initiative for spotlighting Jews and the day of rest, while others have misgivings over the mingling of religion and state

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Last week, President Donald Trump proclaimed this year’s Jewish American Heritage Month and left many Jewish leaders floored.

In addition to the perfunctory celebration of “the countless contributions” that Jewish Americans have made to the nation, Trump declared the first national Shabbat, beginning at sundown on May 15, “in special honor of 250 glorious years of American independence.”

“I was blown away,” Rabbi Eliezer Wolf of Miami’s Beit David Highland Lakes Shul, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “I [couldn’t] believe what I [was] reading. No president has ever done that. A president doesn’t need to do that. This was something that was very unique, especially during a time like this, where Jews, even in America, are feeling a lot of hate.”

Immediately, Wolf, a Chabad-ordained rabbi, knew that he needed to get planning, and two days after Trump’s proclamation, his congregation announced “a Shabbat dinner celebrating religious freedom for 250 years in the great USA.”

While many Jewish groups — predominantly Orthodox and conservative ones — have wholeheartedly embraced “Shabbat 250,” as it was dubbed, other more progressive organizations and congregations have expressed ambivalence and misgivings about it, concerned that such an initiative erodes the religious freedoms that Jews in particular have fought so hard to establish and protect in the United States.

Rabbi Amicha Lau-Lavie, of the progressive Lab/Shul in New York City, discussed his concerns in a note to members, acknowledging the political issues with the initiative while stressing the importance of Shabbat.

“I propose that we show up for Shabbat, but that we rewrite the guest list. I suggest we each adapt this ‘National Shabbat’ in our own unique way – not because a leader commanded it, but because our humanity demands it,” Lau-Lavie wrote. “I encourage us to set the table for a fabulous Friday night dinner or Saturday brunch as our oldest tech tool for dialogue and discussion. Fill your table with friends, but also with those you don’t agree with. Debate this day and what it means for you in this confusing context.”

For Yitzchok Tandler, the co-founder of Young Jewish Conservatives, the friends that he wants to fill his table with for Shabbat 250 are “young American Jews who are politically conservative, who might not be Orthodox or Shabbat-observant,” he told *eJP*.

His organization, which functions under the nonprofit Jewish Heritage Movement, is offering \$180 micro-grants, supported by anonymous donors, for young, politically conservative Jews to hold Shabbat dinners honoring the occasion.

The organization’s marquee event is an annual Shabbat dinner held at the Conservative Political Action Conference, last hosted in Grapevine, Texas, in March. “Had there been more advanced notice, we would probably have organized in-person Shabbat programs like we do throughout the year around the country,” Tandler said. “Considering the short notice, we figured that the

second-best thing we can do is empower people to organize their own Shabbat in their own homes.”

The practice of marking the Sabbath, once confined to Jewish circles, has become increasingly mainstream in politically conservative circles, even non-Jewish ones, he said, particularly since the assassination of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk in September. Kirk’s final book, which he finished writing weeks before his killing, was titled *Stop, in the Name of God: Why Honoring the Sabbath Will Transform Your Life*.

One hundred and thirty applications for micro-grants flooded into YJC from across the country, and even one from an American student studying in the United Kingdom. The demand was so great that the organization had to shutter the online form within days and will have to turn down many applicants, but it is prioritizing young right-wing Jews hosting Shabbat dinners for the first time and has already handed out \$5,000, according to YJC.

“This declaration of Shabbat 250 is in line with the kind of relationship that we’ve seen from this White House with American Jewry,” Tandler said, pointing to a summit for young Jewish leaders to discuss antisemitism held last June at the White House, which YJC helped organize. “Our organization has had very positive experiences [with the Trump administration].”

As the national Shabbat inches closer, grassroots websites have also popped up, though their provenance and affiliations of these are unclear. One entrepreneurial site, “Shabbat250 kit,” sells traditional pre-

cooked meals, complete with frozen cholent and babka.

Chabad – which as a movement distances itself from partisan politics, but whose members generally support conservative parties – has also embraced Shabbat 250, with many local communities holding related events.

“As the Rebbe noted, this nation’s founders recognized that [the United States] establishment was guided by divine providence — and that the freedoms it affords are endowed by the creator,” Rabbi Motti Seligson, director of public relations for Chabad, told eJP, referring to the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. “That’s a vision Jews have always understood — and Shabbat is how we’ve always expressed it.”

Representatives from Yeshiva University, Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union sent an email to affiliated congregational rabbis reiterating Trump’s call and encouraging “that this sense of *Hakarat Hatov* [gratitude] find particular expression during the recitation of the *tefillah* [prayers] for the United States government, a moment already designated within our *tefillah* to acknowledge the kindness and protection afforded to us that we do not take for granted.”

When Rabbi Yehoshua Mizrahi, who serves the B’nai Israel Synagogue in Pensacola, Fla., announced an event tied to Shabbat 250, titled “A Shabbat for America,” the majority of congregants were elated, but others felt “anything that Trump does is inherently tainted,” he told eJP.

“I try to remind these people that this is not political. If President Obama had made a similar declaration, we would be doing the same thing,” he said.

Mizrahi sees the event, held during weekly services with a *kiddush* luncheon organized by his wife, a professional chef, as

an opportunity to bond with non-Jewish neighbors, including Christian congregations and members of B’nei Noach, a congregation of non-Jews who follow the so-called Seven Noahide Laws.

“The *Beit Hamikdash* [Holy Temple] is called a house of prayer for all people,” Mizrahi said. “The shul is a mini *Beit Hamikdash* until the *Beit Hamikdash* is restored, so to have people not of the Jewish faith come join us in prayer is a very, very powerful thing.”

The national Shabbat is “a very important opportunity to make a statement,” he said. “The Torah says those who bless the Jewish people will be blessed, and those who curse us will be cursed. It’s said to Avraham, then it’s reiterated to Yitzchak. It’s reiterated to Jacob. And so we want to give the community a chance to join with us and receive those blessings.”

But other Jewish leaders are uncomfortable with a national event based around any religion, and the majority of organizations that are celebrating Shabbat 250 lean Orthodox, a group that predominantly supported Trump in the last election.

“There’s a fine line between celebrating Jewish heritage and identity, which our government should be doing, and breaking the important barrier between church and state, which has protected the Jewish community and so many others in this country for generations,” Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, told eJP.

America provided Jews with refuge because it allowed them to live and practice freely, without privilege or prejudice based on their beliefs, Spitalnick said. When Church and state lines are blurred, no matter which faith seems favored or endorsed, it opens the door to trouble.

“One day you’re in and the next day you could be out,” she said. “When the government starts breaking down that line between church and state, no matter the religion, it ultimately is going to create a situation in which Jews, or any other community, might be on the wrong side at one point, either under this administration or the next.”

Spitalnick noted that Trump in particular has repeatedly weighed in on what makes a good Jew, saying for example that “any Jewish person that votes for Democrats hates their religion.” She also said that this proclamation comes as other members of the administration have been accused of proselytizing from their official platforms.

However, she said, “if it is simply a celebration of Jewish identity and practice, then that’s very different than trying to utilize the government to advance a specific approach to religion or a specific way of practicing.”

Wolf said that some of his congregants were also uncomfortable with the event the synagogue is planning because they are uncomfortable with the president. However, he emphasized that the event is not about who is in power, but about the acknowledgment of respect by the head of a world superpower.

His congregation was one of the first to announce an event and is planning to go all out for the dinner, adorning the synagogue in Americana and pictures of Jewish American accomplishments.

Wolf, who was born and raised in Australia, also hopes to tailor the menu to American foods, which can be tricky, he said, when the first thing people think of are burgers and fries. “America has very sloppy national foods — not such gourmet things for Shabbat dinner.” ♦

DECEMBER 15, 2025

Serving faith and nation: The rabbis bringing light to U.S. troops on Europe's front lines

Jewish military chaplains told JI about their drive to be ohr l'goyim, a light unto the nations

By Gabby Deutch

The women's basketball team at Rochelle Zell Jewish High School in Chicago was practicing earlier this month ahead of its annual Senior Night when an announcement came over the intercom, presenting a special guest. That's where the video starts — one of those designed-to-go-viral tearjerkers showing a child reuniting with their parent who is in the military.

"He is joining us after leaving the military service in Europe," the announcer says. Team members start to look around, smiling but confused, when they see that the door to the gym is open.

"We are grateful for his dedication, especially his daughter Hannah," the announcer continues. That's when one athlete, in a long-sleeve practice jersey and a ponytail, begins to cry and run toward the door. "Thank you for your service and sacrifice, and welcome home, U.S. Army Chaplain Rabbi Aaron Melman." Everyone cheers. Throwing her arms around her father, Hannah sobs.

Melman, a Conservative rabbi who since 2021 has served as a chaplain in the Illinois Army National Guard, had just returned from a U.S. Army base in Western Poland. He submitted his request for leave back in September but didn't tell his daughter, who was devastated most of all to learn his deployment conflicted with the pinnacle of her high school basketball career. (She was more upset that he would miss that game than her graduation.) When she hugged him, Melman took off his cap and revealed a light brown yarmulke that matched his fatigues.

"We made it happen," Melman tells his daughter in the video, smiling. Days later, RZJHS won at Senior Night. Hannah scored four points.

For more than two decades after he graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2002, Melman was a congregational rabbi in the northern suburbs of Chicago. He had thought, early in his career, about join-

ing the military — his father served in the U.S. Army Reserves — but decided against enlisting, recognizing that serving in active duty would be challenging as he raised two young children.

But later, when his kids were older, the itch to serve returned. Melman was commissioned as an officer in the Illinois Army National Guard, a responsibility that typically required two days of service a month and two weeks each year, until he was sent to Poland earlier this year. That assignment made him one of several Jewish chaplains serving on the front lines of Europe, providing religious support and counseling to American soldiers — most of whom are not Jewish — who are stationed in Germany, Poland and other allied nations largely as a bulwark against Russia.

Many Jewish chaplains serve in the military only part-time. They fit the training into already-busy schedules leading congregations and providing pastoral care to people in their own communities.

Several military rabbis told JI that they view their mission as more than counseling the soldiers in their care and helping them deal with the hardships of military service. They explained that it's also about reminding American Jews — many of whom have parents or grandparents who fought in World War II, Korea or Vietnam — about the value of service. During World War II, the military printed pocket-sized Hebrew bibles for Jewish soldiers. Today, some Jews don't know anyone serving in the military.

"Most Jews in America are not connected in any way, shape or form to the United States Armed Forces. The common reaction many of us get, when we go into the armed forces here in the States is, 'Oh, you don't want to go into the IDF?' or, 'Why didn't you go into the IDF?' And for the record, I happen to be a very strong Zionist," Melman told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week.

"One of the things for me that I've really grown to appreciate is trying to connect the younger generation of American Jews into joining or thinking about joining the military and how important it is."

Rabbi Aaron Gaber spent nine months at Grafenwoehr, a major American base in Germany, starting last summer. As a member of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, his unit's mission was to train Ukrainian soldiers, and Gaber was tasked with training Ukrainian chaplains. He took them to the Memorium Nuremberg Trials, a museum located inside the German courtroom where Nazi leaders were tried for their crimes after World War II.

"That created a whole conversation about moral integrity and personal courage. How do you say to your commander, 'Don't commit atrocities'? Or how do you keep your soldiers who are angry at what's happening and want to do things that are unethical or immoral from doing that?" Gaber told JI. "That elicited a whole conversation on a theological level about light versus darkness, good versus evil, but also then on a practical level: How do you advise your commander in a way that gives him or her the option not to do something that shouldn't be done?"

Most of Gaber's job, when dealing either with Ukrainian troops or American, involved assisting people who were not Jewish.

"As a rabbi, I got to make sure every week there was a Protestant worship service happening," said Gaber, who returned from Germany in June (and specified that he did not lead those services).

Last year, he volunteered to spend the High Holidays in Poland and Lithuania. He drove between several different bases to make sure Jewish soldiers had access to religious services, food and learning opportunities tied to the holidays.

"I take the idea of *ohr l'goyim*, or bringing light to the world, I was able to bring light to

the world. I was able to help Jewish soldiers celebrate their faith. If I met 10 Jewish soldiers through the entire two weeks, that was a lot. So it was individual work,” Gaber said. “In one case, I had one soldier travel, I think, three hours each way to be able to spend an hour with me. He couldn’t go by himself, so he had a noncommissioned officer, one of his squad leaders, go with him. That was the length that the military can and does go to make sure soldiers can access their faith.”

Ohr l’goyim is a phrase that comes up often for Jewish military chaplains. For Rabbi Laurence Bazer, a retired U.S. Army colonel who is now a vice president at the JCC Association and the Jewish Welfare Board’s Jewish Chaplains Council, those words — from the Book of Isaiah — commanded him to be a light unto the nations. “And that’s not just to our own fellow Jews, but to the rest of the community,” Bazer told JI.

A friend of his from the North Dakota National Guard once took Bazer, who served in the Massachusetts Army National Guard, to visit North Dakota’s state partner in Ghana. He sat down with a group of Ghanaian sol-

diers and told them to ask him anything they might want to know about Judaism.

“Now, these are all Catholic, Protestant and Muslim chaplains from the Ghanaian army,” Bazer recalled. “I said, ‘You could ask me, like, why Jews don’t believe in the New Testament, or Jesus, whatever.’ That’s part of the role that I love doing, of being, again, *ohr l’goyim*, a light unto the nations, to be able to share the positive, affirming side of Judaism so that they felt enriched. It was all in true fellowship of, we’re all servants of the Divine.”

Bazer spent his final years in the military in Washington, working full time in an active duty role at the National Guard’s headquarters. He oversaw the religious response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 racial-justice protests and the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

“I was advising commanders up to four stars at a senior level about what’s going on religiously, which really meant the moral welfare of their troops,” said Bazer, who had served in New York during the 9/11 attacks and later led the chaplaincy response to the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013. “That

emotional level affects readiness, and chaplains are the key to help that readiness.”

In 2023, Bazer was asked to go to Europe to lead Passover services and programming for Jewish troops. He led Passover Seders in Germany and Poland, and then drove between Lithuania and Latvia, delivering matzah and visiting with Jewish soldiers.

The Seder at Grafenwoehr took place on a large lawn on the base. After he spoke about opening the door for the prophet Elijah, a symbolic act tied to hope that the Messiah will come, a Christian chaplain on base who had attended the Seder pulled Bazer aside. He pointed to a tower that stood next to the lawn.

“He says, ‘You know, Hitler used to go up there and watch,’” Bazer said. The base — now so central to America’s operations in Europe — was once used by the Nazis. “To think that back then he used to watch the Nazis do formation, and now, in 2023 we’re holding a Passover Seder on the same base in the shadow of that tower is an incredible experience.” ♦

OPINION MARCH 12, 2026

Harnessing America’s 250th birthday to reimagine our civic culture

Ahead of the semiquincentennial, an urgent case for reclaiming civic engagement as a Jewish value

By Rabbi Charles E. Savenor

Opinion piece from eJewishPhilanthropy.

The Semiquincentennial is almost here. Will we be ready?

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Paul Revere’s midnight ride helped ignite the American Revolution. Four months from now, our nation will face another historic moment: the Semiquincentennial, a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring Americans together through our civic traditions.

Using civic holidays for nation-building is not new. When President Ulysses S. Grant signed congressional legislation in 1870 recognizing the first federal holidays, the nation was still healing from the Civil War. Independence Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas

and New Year’s Day constituted the first four holidays enacted into law, with Washington’s birthday (aka Presidents Day) added in 1880. Originally established for federal workers in DC, Congress extended these holidays to federal workers nationwide in 1885.

These civic holidays were not simply invented to create time off from work; rather, they were designed as shared rituals to reinforce national identity and common values.

Over time, civic holidays did more than create calendrical bridges between North and South. They inspired rituals and traditions that contribute to and inform our national identity, strengthen resilience in the face of challenges and remind us that be-

longing is built not only through memory of the past but through shared experiences in the present.

Independence Day, for example, connects generations through fireworks and barbecues, but also — and most importantly — through public readings of the Declaration of Independence, affirming our shared commitment to freedom, liberty and equality. Memorial Day promotes national remembrance, binding communities through parades, cemetery visits and moments of silence honoring our military’s service and sacrifice. More recently, Martin Luther King Jr. Day has become associated with what Senator Harris Wofford and U.S. Represent-

ative John Lewis called a “day on, not a day off,” promoting volunteerism and public service.

In short, our civic holidays are intended to serve as recurring opportunities to embed and embody the best values and aspirations that define America.

In 1968, Congress enacted the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, shifting certain civic holidays to Mondays to create regular three-day weekends for American workers. President Lyndon Johnson endorsed the legislation, noting that it would help families spend more time together and encourage Americans to travel and explore their country.

Despite these practical considerations, the unintended consequence was a heightened focus on convenience and commerce over civic meaning. As the original intent of these days faded, long weekends became more associated with mattress sales and barbecues than national connection and reflection. Many schools and communities now treat these dates as intermissions from content and community rather than invitations to engage in national identity formation.

If civic holidays have lost some of their meaning, they can also be reclaimed. Civic Spirit and civics organizations nationwide are working to restore these days as powerful, formative moments in students’ lives.

How to best reclaim civic holidays is on the agenda this week as the country marks the fourth annual Civic Learning Week, a national initiative dedicated to strengthening civic education and engagement. At a forum in Philadelphia earlier this week, educators, funders, scholars and elected officials explored how we can better leverage the traditions already embedded in our civic calendar to reinvigorate our shared democratic culture.

The mission of Civic Spirit, where I work, is to train teachers and prepare students to become informed and engaged members of American democracy. One of our priorities is to guide our growing network of Jewish, Catholic and other Christian private schools to reclaim civic holidays.

Our approach is to turn these “days off” into “on-ramps,” opportunities to teach, practice and live out the values at the heart of American democracy.

Additionally, there is value in commemorating milestones on the actual date whenever they fall. A three-day weekend is always appreciated, but does it make sense to observe July 4 two days later?

Each civic holiday holds the potential to become a school-wide learning experience and a communal reflection on the American experiment. Leaders must ensure that systems are put in place to help schools, synagogues, camps and community organizations prepare thoughtfully.

A prime example of this civic holiday renaissance comes from Bornblum Jewish Community School in Memphis, Tenn. For Constitution Day, students participate in mock constitutional conventions, explore the Bill of Rights through interactive exhibits and engage in debates about contemporary applications of constitutional principles. On Veterans Day, the school welcomes local veterans to speak with students, fostering powerful intergenerational dialogue and mutual appreciation. Through assemblies, service projects and creative learning formats, students experience civic values in meaningful ways.

Feedback from schools in Civic Spirit’s growing network shows that civic holidays provide educators with a platform to explore civic themes, discuss American identity and engage parents and community members in addressing local challenges. But this sacred work requires planning, resources, innovation and faith in the power of education to shape civic character. Civic leaders, funders and policymakers must invest in this long-term capacity if civic holidays are to serve their original purpose of strengthening national identity, unity and resilience.

Looking ahead, the Semiquincentennial represents the Super Bowl of civic holidays in our lifetime. America’s 250th offers not just a time to look back, but an opportunity to look forward by engaging students, schools and communities in the active practice of citizenship.

For the Jewish community, the Semiquincentennial carries special meaning. Before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, America was often seen as the new Promised Land, “*Di Goldene Medine*.” In *Saying No to Hate: Overcoming Antisemitism in America*, Norman Finkelstein writes:

“In the more than 2,000-year history of the Jewish diaspora, no country has offered Jews more freedom, legal protection and opportunity than the United States of America. Yet, American Jews have always been aware of a residue of anti-Jewish hate lurking in the background, ready to emerge at any time.”

This dual reality, deep gratitude for freedom alongside vigilance against hate, has helped shape a uniquely resilient Jewish American identity. That resilience is a gift the Jewish community can offer the wider nation as it grapples with polarization, division and distrust.

With the Semiquincentennial taking place during the summer, when thousands of students and educators will be at overnight camps, responsibility for marking this national moment must extend beyond the classroom. Communities will expect programming, town halls, volunteer experiences, conversations with elected officials and study sessions that elevate the experience. As discussed at the recent AJ2026 Conference, since July Fourth will take place on Saturday, Civic Spirit is developing educational materials for Jewish summer camps, synagogues and Shabbat tables for what we are calling “Independence Shabbat.”

Our preparation for America’s 250th must reimagine civic holidays as laboratories of democracy, where students and citizens alike become active participants in shaping their communities.

This “Freedom Trail 250 Checklist” can guide schools, houses of worship, community centers and camps in their preparation:

By creating civic roadmaps, building intergenerational partnerships, investing in educators, empowering students and elevating rituals of belonging, schools, camps and communities can ensure that America’s 250th is not just a day of fireworks but a milestone of renewal for our democracy.

Today, with divisions running deep and a rapid-fire news cycle across multiple platforms, American society often seems too distracted by the present moment to celebrate the past, let alone imagine the future. Yet the Semiquincentennial will arrive whether we are ready or not. To make Independence Day 2026 an experience remembered for years to come, educators, parents, clergy, funders and

civic leaders must approach this milestone with creativity, thoughtfulness and the best of what technology can offer. We can look to the success of the Bicentennial for inspiration: that milestone was leveraged as a national opportunity to heal after Vietnam, Watergate and growing distrust in government. Programs like CBS's "Bicentennial Minutes" and national campaigns reminded Americans about the experiences and ideas

we share and the individuals who shaped our nation.

Educators, communal leaders and funders must also ensure that celebrations build an infrastructure that strengthens civic learning well beyond 2026 — at least through the anniversary of the Constitution in 2037. At its core, civics is about cultivating identity, building resilience and ensuring that democratic leadership is renewed in

every generation. By reclaiming the soul of these holidays, leaders at every level can help revive the civic culture of our country.

Rabbi Charles E. Savenor is the executive director of Civic Spirit, which was recently awarded the Covenant Foundation's Signature Grant for the organization's "Building Civic Bridges" initiative. ♦

OPINION JUNE 30, 2026

How Jews reinvented themselves — and America

By Steven Windmueller

Opinion piece from eJewishPhilanthropy.

As the United States celebrates its 250th anniversary, the relationship between America and its Jewish community can best be understood as reciprocal. Jews reinvented themselves through the American experience, and they, in turn, helped reshape this nation.

Elsewhere, I have described this relationship as the "Jewish Contract with America" and have written about the founders' attraction to the idea of America as a "New Zion." The United States offered something historically unusual: a constitutional system that neither established a national religion nor limited citizenship on the basis of faith. The Constitution and the protections later reinforced by the Bill of Rights enabled Jews to become full citizens without surrendering their Jewish identity. Instead of asking, "How do we survive under someone else's rule?" Jews in America could ask, "How do we help build our society?"

From immigrant to American

The great immigration waves of the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought millions of Jews from Eastern Europe to American shores.

Many developed a dual sense of belonging: fully American and distinctively Jewish. This identity embraced democratic values, civic participation, educational achievement and social responsibility. Over time, elements of Jewish communal life,

culture and traditions became woven into the broader fabric of American society.

If American society rewarded competition, talent and initiative, Jews recognized that success would require creativity, adaptability and the willingness to engage a dynamic culture built around the ideals of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

America's tradition of religious liberty encouraged innovation. Rather than developing under a single centralized authority, American Jewish life diversified into distinct religious movements, adopting in many respects the denominational framework characteristic of American Christianity. Judaism in America increasingly became a matter of individual and communal choice.

From the outset, Jews also embraced what became known as the "Stuyvesant Principle": the requirement that the community must care for its own. Synagogues, schools, social service and cultural organizations were built largely through voluntary communal initiative rather than state support.

How Jews helped reinvent America

Jewish participation helped normalize the idea that America could be a nation of many faiths rather than one dominated by a single religious tradition. Jewish civic leaders demonstrated that religious minorities could participate fully in public life while remaining true to their own heritage.

Many Jews saw it as their responsibility to strengthen the democratic principles that had made their own flourishing possible, including religious liberty, economic opportunity, freedom of speech and equal protection under the law.

Jewish Americans have had a profound influence on entertainment, literature, music and the arts as well, helping to shape what much of the world recognizes as American culture. Hollywood itself was significantly developed by Jewish immigrant entrepreneurs who recognized the possibilities of a new industry.

Jewish Americans have also played leading roles in universities, research institutions and the advancement of technology, medicine, science and the social sciences. American Jewish communities created extensive networks of hospitals, educational institutions, social service agencies, museums, charitable foundations and welfare organizations. Outside the Catholic Church, the Jewish communal ecosystem represents one of the nation's largest religiously affiliated networks of voluntary services. Many of these institutions have long served not only Jews but the broader public, reinforcing America's tradition of civic association and philanthropy.

Contemporary American Jewish life is marked by increasing ethnic and racial diversity, interfaith and blended families, new forms of religious expression and renewed engagement with Jewish learning and culture. It also reflects ongoing debates over

democracy, antisemitism, immigration and Israel.

At the same time, the broader American experiment continues to be shaped by communities that preserve distinct identities while participating fully in the civic life of the nation.

In that sense, the American Jewish experience has been both a story of adaptation and an example of the broader American project: building a nation in which diverse communities preserve their heritage while contributing to a common civic culture.

Jonathan Sarna, the leading historian of American Judaism, has often emphasized the reciprocal nature of this relationship. In *American Judaism: A History*, he argues that America gave Jews unprecedented freedom, and Jews responded by continually reinventing Judaism. America did not simply provide a home for Jewish life; it fostered new forms of Jewish expression.

Hasia Diner, in *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000*, demonstrates how ordinary Jewish immigrants became active participants in the making of urban Amer-

ica through commerce, labor activism, politics and culture.

As Oscar Handlin famously wrote: “I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.” Jews were not merely absorbed into America; they helped define what America would become.

In many respects, America transformed Jews from a marginal minority into one of the world’s most vibrant and flourishing Jewish communities. At the same time, Jews contributed to the development of a more pluralistic American society. To borrow and adapt Handlin’s insight: The history of the Jews in America is not simply the story of a minority adapting to a nation; it is part of the story of how this nation itself was made.

In this moment

Is the American Jewish story entering a new chapter?

Over the past decade, significant cultural and political shifts have raised questions that many American Jews had not previously confronted. Rising antisemitism, in-

creasing political polarization, changing patterns of identity and renewed debates over the meaning of pluralism have led some to ask whether the long-standing “contract with America” is under new strain.

History suggests that the relationship between America and its Jews has never been static. Each generation has redefined what it means to be both Jewish and American. The central question for the decades ahead may not be whether that contract has ended, but how it will be renewed.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, the future of the American Jewish experience may once again depend on the same reciprocal process that shaped its past: America’s capacity to sustain a pluralistic democracy and the willingness of its Jewish citizens to continue participating in the unfinished work of building a common civic culture.

Steven Windmueller is *emeritus professor of Jewish communal studies at the Jack H. Skirball Campus of HUC-JIR in Los Angeles.* ♦