

Let America Be America Again

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!

Of owning everything for one's own greed!¹

Eighty-five years ago, Langston Hughes wrote these haunting words. He speaks first as one who longs for the good old days, when America was a shining example to the world, a beacon of democracy and equality and opportunity, the land of the free and the home of the brave. "Let America be America again," he says. And then he interrupts his elegy, reminding us with biting clarity that the American Dream has always been just that, a dream. The promise of America has, from its beginnings, been out of reach for the poor, the minority, the immigrant. Anyone who says we must "Make America Great Again" is living in a fantasy world. For Hughes, it was never that great to begin with.

And still the myth of America retains its hold on all of us, even Langston Hughes himself. So the poem continues,

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.

Hughes beautifully articulates the paradox of the American Dream: it is so strong and brave and true that we all believe in it, even those of us, or especially those of us, who have never had a share in it. We know it's an illusion and still, we believe in it.

So it was with both shock and resignation that I watched events unfold in the Capitol this week. It was in some ways completely unbelievable. How could the President of the United States encourage his supporters to storm the Capitol, some

¹ <https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again>

wrapped in their Confederate flags, to use violence and terror to attempt to overturn the results of a democratic election? How could the Capitol police be so ill-prepared for an attack we all knew was coming, treating the attackers with kid gloves, some even posing with them in their selfies? How could so many lawmakers -- both before and after the attack -- continue to speak lies about voter fraud, or to object to certifying the results of the election just because they didn't like them? How could all of this happen here, in the United States of America? It is unbelievable, and it is also completely believable. Anyone who has been paying attention, especially during the last four years, shouldn't have been surprised. As Roxane Gay wrote in The New York Times this week, "This is America. This has always been America. If this were not America, this coup attempt would not have happened. It's time we face this ugly truth, let it sink into the marrow of our bones, let it move us to action."² Some of us are just now realizing it, but America never was America, not to any of us.

So whether you were shocked by this week's insurrection or grimly waiting for it expectantly, or both, we must face this ugly truth: this is America. And here's another truth: we the people are responsible, and we the people are the only ones who can fix it.

Let me be perfectly clear: those who attacked the Capitol this week are guilty. Those who incited them to attack are guilty. Those who abetted and excused the perpetrators are guilty. But, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, "In a free society, some are guilty. All are responsible."

In the days following the election, when the Republican leadership supported President Trump's refusal to accept the results, one senior official said, "What is the

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/opinion/capitol-riot-trump-america.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

downside for humoring him for this little bit of time? No one seriously thinks the results will change. He went golfing this weekend. It's not like he's plotting how to prevent Joe Biden from taking power on Jan. 20. He's tweeting about filing some lawsuits, those lawsuits will fail, then he'll tweet some more about how the election was stolen, and then he'll leave."³ What's the downside of humoring him? Well, we saw the downside this week. "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."⁴ It was true when Edmund Burke said it in 1770 and it is true today.

And that is what's at stake here. It might sound overly dramatic to talk about good and evil, but this is not just a political issue, it's a moral issue. We are in a fight for the soul of America and a fight for our own souls as well.

Jewish tradition has a lot to say about how to create a just, moral society. In the Torah, God commands the Israelites to create a judicial system, to select fair, trustworthy judges who will uphold the law, with God as the ultimate Supreme Court. The Torah prescribes a welfare system by which the poor and needy are taken care of and includes laws meant to prevent the exploitation of the most vulnerable. According to the Torah, our ideal society requires structures and systems that allow the Israelites to survive and flourish, and to live out their covenant with God.

But Jewish tradition is also clear that however important it is to establish good systems of government and justice, our individual obligations to the good are equally vital. Goodness and righteousness are brought into the world through each one of us, and evil must also be rejected and stamped out by each one of us. As the Torah

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-republicans-election-challenges/2020/11/09/49e2c238-22c4-11eb-952e-0c475972cfc0_story.html

⁴ Edmund Burke, Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents 82-83 (1770) in: Select Works of Edmund Burke, vol. 1, p. 146 (Liberty Fund ed. 1999).

declares, "*Hocheach tochiach et amitecha*. You shall surely rebuke your kinsman, and incur no guilt because of him" (Lev. 19:17). The Talmud goes even further, saying: "Anyone who has the capability to protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and did not protest, he himself is held accountable for the sins of the members of his household and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is held accountable for the sins of the people of his town. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so, he is held accountable for the sins of the whole world" (Shabbat 54b). And lest we think that this obligation to rebuke our fellows only applies when it also serves our own interests, Maimonides explains: "If [the sinner] receives [rebuke] attentively from him, it is well; if not, he should rebuke him a second, even a third time. So is the constant duty of a man to continue to rebuke his fellow, even until the sinner strikes him, and say unto him: "I will not listen."⁵ Even when the sinner strikes us, even when we risk losing power or wealth or comfort, we are commanded to speak against another's wicked actions.

So if there are any elected officials listening tonight, I urge you to use the full power of your position to condemn any efforts to tear down our democracy, including the spreading of lies about voter fraud and including the incitement to violence, and I urge you to do everything in your power to bring the perpetrators of these crimes to justice. If you work for a social media company, I urge you to use your power to demand that incitement and the wilful spreading of dangerous lies not be allowed on your platform. And to all the rest of us, I urge us to use all of our power - civic, financial, social, and spiritual - to stand up against tyranny and hate, wherever we encounter it.

⁵ Mishneh Torah, Deot 6:7.

We're all responsible for electing people of conscience and courage into office. We're all responsible for holding those leaders accountable, demanding that they serve their country and not their party, the common good and not their own political ambition. We're all responsible for refusing to allow lies and hateful speech to be circulated in our society with impunity. This fight is not without its risks: we might lose a job, we might lose a friend. But the risks of not engaging in the fight are far worse.

Our leaders and our institutions have failed us and the American Dream seems as far from reality as ever before. But even in our anger and our sadness, there is hope.

Here is how Langston Hughes ends his poem:

... O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.

The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

Ken y'hi ratzon - may it be God's will, and may it be our own.