

**Calling George Washington:
On Christian Nationalism and Jewish Belonging
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The task of a leader—whether a judge, a politician, or a rabbi—is, in the words of legal theorist James Boyd White, to “call a community into being.”

We do this by describing the kind of community we want to build and inspiring others to help bring that vision to life.

This week’s Torah portion is Vayikra—which means “to call.” So tonight, with war raging abroad and antisemitism rising at home, I want to ask:

What kind of country do we want to be?

Last Shabbat morning with Dr. Gary Zola, we studied George Washington’s famous [letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island](#). In that letter, Washington assured the Jewish community that:

“All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.”

Tragically, Washington excluded enslaved Africans from this promise. Still, despite that moral failure, his vision for the new nation was revolutionary: The United States would not merely tolerate religious minorities—it would recognize them as full and equal members of the political community.

For Jews, this was unprecedented.

For centuries we lived in societies at the pleasure of the local ruler. Sometimes the government protected us; sometimes it didn’t. Our place was always conditional.

Washington promised something different: Jews would not live in America by permission of the government. We would belong here as full citizens.

But today, that vision of pluralistic democracy is in jeopardy—and our safety as Jews along with it.

We see it in attacks on synagogues, antisemitic conspiracy theories creeping into political discourse, and grotesque demonstrations like the one last weekend in Times Square where protesters accused Israel of “eating babies.”

And if that weren’t enough, we also see it in the growing influence of Christian nationalism in the halls of power.

Christian nationalism is a political ideology that seeks to preserve the supposed Anglo-Protestant heritage of our country and embed a particular form of conservative Christianity in American government.

We're seeing it in the harsh enforcement of immigration law, and in states like Texas that are [injecting Bible study into public schools](#).

We're hearing it in the explicitly religious language of Defense Secretary Hegseth, who in recent press briefings on the Iran war, [quoted a psalm praising God for "training my hands for war and my fingers for battle,"](#) and implored "the American people [to] [please pray for \[the troops\] every day on bended knee with your family, in your schools, in your churches, in the name of Jesus Christ.](#)"

Listen to how Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri, a leading advocate of this ideology, describes America. In [a widely noted speech in 2024](#), Hawley said:

"We are a nation forged from Augustine's vision...a nation defined by the dignity of the common man, as given to us in the Christian religion."

Then he declared:

"Some will say I am calling America a Christian nation. And so I am."

Hawley went on to claim that "Christian nationalism founded American democracy," insisting that America protects religious liberty and welcomes people of many backgrounds *because* of that Christian heritage.

That may sound reassuring. But it isn't.

See, in Hawley's view, Americans' freedoms flow *not* from the "inherent natural rights" Washington described, but from the country's *Christian* character. Meaning that non-Christian minorities like us enjoy rights only "by the indulgence of one class of people"—the very arrangement Washington rejected.

This isn't just rhetoric. Ideas about who belongs in a community eventually show up in its laws. A bill moving through Congress right now—[the SAVE Act](#)—would help advance this vision.

Christian nationalism holds that the government has a duty to preserve the nation's Christian character. In a democracy, the only way to do that is to shape the electorate so that it will sustain Christian governance over time.

That is difficult in a diverse society where the Constitution guarantees voting rights to all adult citizens. But the SAVE Act would give the government more control over who participates in elections.

Under current law, once you register to vote, you are presumed eligible to cast a ballot. The government can challenge your eligibility, but the *government*, not the citizen, carries the burden of proof.

The SAVE Act turns that presumption on its head. Instead of the *government* having to prove that you *don't* have the right to vote, *you* have to prove that you *do*.

Before entering the voting booth, you would have to present documentary proof of citizenship, such as a passport or birth certificate.

That might seem like a small procedural change—even a reasonable one. But over time, the consequences would be profound.

In practice, it would make the government—rather than the Constitution—the final authority over who gets to vote.

This transfer of power away from “we the people” would be dangerous—because if the state controls access to the ballot box, it will hold the key to controlling the future.

In the Middle Ages, Christian kingdoms accomplished this simply by barring non-Christians from holding public office. In a modern democracy, the mechanism would be the bureaucratic process.

Anyone who has dealt with government agencies knows how difficult it can be to obtain official documents: filling out forms, waiting in lines, being told you have the wrong paperwork, discovering files can't be located, or waiting months for a reply.

Most of the time, that's just bureaucratic frustration. But once your ability to vote *depends* on that paperwork, those delays become *politically consequential*.

It would be troubling enough if bureaucratic inefficiency prevented citizens from obtaining the documents they need to participate in an election.

But how long would it take before bad actors in government begin slow-walking the process for disfavored populations?

The system would be ripe for abuse—and because the burden would fall on *citizens* to challenge the *government*, correcting those injustices could take years.

Many people will say we shouldn't worry. Christian nationalists love the Jews, they'll say—just look how pro-Israel they are.

But that view is shortsighted.

Yes, we might thrive for a time—just as our ancestors did in Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and Germany.

But our place here would ultimately depend on the goodwill of others—and Jewish history has taught us how fragile that can be.

These things rarely happen all at once.

They happen gradually. Quietly.

Until one day, a new ruler arises—

a king who “knows not Joseph.”

And suddenly everything changes.

That is precisely the kind of society George Washington was determined to prevent when he wrote to the Jews of Newport in 1790.

The question now is whether we will preserve the pluralistic community Washington called into being: a nation where belonging is secure, where rights are inherent to all citizens, and where no American lives here merely by the indulgence of someone else.

What we do now matters.

And time may be running out.