A More Perfect Union

Kol Nidre 5787 Rabbi Barry H. Block

Some rabbis select a theme for the High Holy Days each year, building their sermons around it. I have never done that; but this year, after Rosh Hashanah, I noticed a through-line: they're all about imperfection. Each of us is imperfect. Torah is imperfect, Israel is imperfect. Even our beloved dead were imperfect. Tonight, as we contemplate the year ahead, let us acknowledge that America, too, is imperfect, even as we celebrate our nation at two hundred fifty.

On some days, for some people, America seems a lot worse than imperfect. Whether the concern is the health of our democracy or the size of our national debt, the rate of inflation or the rise of White Christian Nationalism, cruel immigration enforcement or the undocumented migrants who yet dwell among us, growing racism or continuing efforts to redress injustices of the past, every American has concerns.

Katharine Lee Bates, poet and professor, composed *America the Beautiful* after an 1893 cross-country trip from Boston to Denver. Yes, as the title suggests, she wrote about America's beauty, but she also alluded to its imperfections. Each stanza begins by extolling the magnificence of this great land and concludes with a prayer for a future America even better than the one revealed to Bates on her journey.[i] John de Graaf, who directed a play about Bates and her ballad, explains: "Awestruck by the 'purple mountain majesties;' to the west and the 'amber waves of grain' far below on the eastern plains, Bates wanted to celebrate the nation's natural beauty. But 'America the Beautiful' is as much critique as celebration, and remarkably relevant to our own times."[ii]

Let's start with the second stanza, leaving the most famous section for last. Having completed her cross-country trek with modes of transportation unavailable to Lewis and Clark, Bates begins by lauding European Americans who traversed the west before her: *O beautiful for pilgrim feet, Whose stern, impassioned stress A thoroughfare for freedom beat Across the wilderness!* She praises the extraordinary effort involved, and we must forgive Bates for disregarding First Americans, which would have been common in her day.

Bates recognizes imperfection, though, if not the displacement of Indians. She concludes this verse, *God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!* Here, the poet introduces the notion that even our beautiful country is blemished in ways that require repair, and she suggests antidotes: self-control and law. Living in the Gilded Age, she bemoaned the excesses of the super-rich of her day, who sought to maximize their legendary

wealth at the expense of their workers. The robber barons' greed left their workers without safe working conditions, let alone a living wage. Bates understood that freedom could only be real for all Americans if laws grant rights to everyone.

Lynn Sherr, author of a 2001 book about Bates and her ballad, explained more recently: "The time period she was writing about was not very different from ours. … It was a time of enormous income inequality…It was also a time of corruption and government graft…Just change a letter to government grift, which is what we've got today."[iii]

"Self-control" loses out to greed, no less in our own day than in the Gilded Age. The wealth accumulated by our highest elected leaders and the billionaires around them is exactly Torah's concern in restricting the king of Israel: "he shall not keep many horses…nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess."[iv] The "law" to which Bates appeals cannot halt corruption and a slide toward oligarchy if it is enforced only against those who are out of power. God's hands and feet—that is, you and I—need to get to work mending our beloved nation's "every flaw."

Bates next praises the Union soldiers who had prevailed in the Civil War, not so many decades earlier: *O beautiful for heroes proved In liberating strife, Who more than self their country loved, And mercy more than life!* Not long after she wrote *America the Beautiful*, though, Bates would be among Wellesley College faculty opposing the imperialism of the Spanish-American War, when the U.S. took control of the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.[v] The "gold" of American military service would need to be "refined"—that is, used only to righteous purpose—*Till all success be nobleness, And every gain divine!*

That stanza, too, is relevant today. After the U.S. invasion of Venezuela in January, *CNN*'s Jake Tapper asked White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller about morality, international relations, and what might be the president's next target. Miller's response was telling: "We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties…, but we live in…the real world, … that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power."[vi] Despite being Jewish, Miller runs afoul of our tradition, for our psalmist prays that the king will rule with righteousness: "Let him champion the lowly among the people, deliver the needy folk, and crush those who wrong them."[vii] Because God, like Bates, wants "all success" to be "nobleness," the section of Deuteronomy that details and limits the rights of the king calls on him to have his own copy of the Torah, not armaments, always at his side.[viii]

O beautiful for patriot dream That sees beyond the years. America's founders were visionary. They framed a constitution that has united a diverse

nation across a quarter millennium and counting. They knew that they birthed the Constitution into a world that would change over time, so they allowed for amendments. They saw a future when the transatlantic slave trade would need to end, so the Constitution provides for that. Thomas Jefferson believed: "Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of [each generation]. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right."[ix] Jefferson was plagued by the immorality of slavery, even as he enslaved his own common law wife and children. He possessed the vision, if not the fortitude, to end it.

The refrain that Bates repeats in the first stanza and the last, "God shed God's grade on thee," is the most important. Grace—in Hebrew חן—is the religious concept that Divine justice is tempered by mercy. God understands that human beings, even visionary patriots like Jefferson, are imperfect, having created all of us that way. Therefore, God mercifully forgives us like a parent who loves their child and punishes only to teach a lesson, to mold a better person in the future.

On these High Holy Days, we call God אבינו, not only מלכנו. God may punish us like a governing ruler, seeking to establish and maintain order, but God also rebukes us like a parent, helping us shape a brighter future.

I should not have been surprised that all my sermons this year coalesce around a theme of imperfection. That's what the High Holy Days are all about—confronting aspects of ourselves, of our community, of our people, and of our nation that need repair, without writing off America, Israel, the Jewish people, or ourselves as unredeemable.

Let us affirm the faith of Katharine Lee Bates: America **is** beautiful, "from sea to shining sea." There is much to love and admire about our nation, from its founding to this day. Even beautiful America, though, is and always has been imperfect. As citizens who contemplate atonement on this Yom Kippur at America's 250th, our duty is to be God's partners, refining the gold that is America. Let us be God's partners, working to mend our nation's every flaw.

Amen.

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[i] The idea for this sermon was provided by Rabbi Amy Schwartzman during a webinar, "Drashing Democracy 2026: Reflecting On America During the High Holy Days!," A More Perfect Union, July 22, 2026. The description of the poem/song in this paragraph is based on Rabbi Schwartzman's words and on Peter Johnson, "Hymn Guide: America the Beautiful," *Anglican Compass*, July 3, 2025, https://anglicancompass.com/hymn-guide-america-the-beautiful/.
[ii] John de Graaf, "The forgotten meaning of 'America the Beautiful," *Cognoscenti*, July 3, 2025, https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2025/07/03/july-4-declaration-of-independence-250-anniversary-united-states-john-de-graaf.
[iii] E.B. Bartels, "Beyond America the Beautiful," *Wellesley Magazine*, Summer 2026, https://magazine.wellesley.edu/issues/summer-2026/beyond-america-the-beautiful.
[iv] Deuteronomy 17:16-17.

[v] De Graaf.
[vi]Michael Froman, "Getting Might Right," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 9, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/getting-might-right.
[vii]Psalms 72:4.
[viii] Deuteronomy 17:18-20.
[ix]1789 Letter from Jefferson to James Madison, found at https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/thomas-jefferson-on-whether-the-american-constitution-is-binding-on-those-who-were-not-born-at-the-time-it-was-signed-and-agreed-to-1789.