

Rabbi Lewis' Message for November, 2012

You know the Fall holy days are truly over when you finally reach the Hebrew month of Heshvan. Heshvan is a month notable in our Jewish calendar for its lack of holidays. The only holidays in the entire month are the Shabbatot, a blessed relief from the month of Tishri.

And yet during this month there is a “holy day” of a more secular nature. It falls on the 21st day of Heshvan this year and is known as Election Day. We don’t always connect our secular holidays with our Jewish values, but we should make that connection in the case of Election Day. The Jewish reason for that connection is found in a 1984 teshuva, an answer to a question posed to an eminent Orthodox rabbi named Moshe Feinstein. The [Jewish Community Relations Council of New York](#) was conducting a voter registration campaign and asked Rav Moshe Feinstein, the foremost modern legal authority in Orthodox circles until his death in 1986, whether Jews have an obligation to vote in American elections. Rabbi Feinstein wrote this reply:

On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety.

A fundamental principle of Judaism is *hakaras hatov* — recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent on each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which guards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on each individual is to register and to vote.

Therefore, I urge all members of the Jewish community to fulfill their obligations by registering as soon as possible, and by voting. By this, we can express our appreciation and contribute to the continued security of our community. (Quoted by Sigal Samuel in [The Daily Beast](#), Oct. 22, 2012)

How fascinating that Rav Feinstein doesn’t find the source of our obligation to vote in Jewish ideas about justice but in Jewish ideas about expressing gratitude. We know we are supposed to wake up in the morning and recite *Modeh/modah ani* in gratitude for awakening. We know we recite a motzi over meals in gratitude for our food. In general, we recite many daily prayers which express gratitude. It makes sense that Rav Feinstein would extend that feeling of appreciation for creation to appreciation

for living in a free country. Voting isn't just the obligation of every citizen, but for us Jews it is also a mitzvah.

Voter registration has become politicized in many parts of the country as some people work to defraud voters of this basic American right. This attempt to prevent certain groups of people from voting is not only a travesty of justice, but from a religious perspective also prevents people from expressing their gratitude for the opportunities afforded by living in this democratic country. We Jews have a unique appreciation for the privilege of citizenship. For many centuries in other parts of the world, we Jews were not accorded citizenship. Even once we were granted citizenship, crimes like the Nuremberg Laws deprived us of that right. Of all people, we know how lucky we are to be citizens and to be allowed the privilege of voting. Make sure you get out and express that gratitude on Election Day. It is the Jewish thing to do.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis