

## January 6th, One Year Later: Rep. Adam Schiff & Rabbi Sharon Brous Discuss the Democracy Crisis

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**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:00:04] I'm Rabbi Sharon Brous from IKAR, and I sat down today with Representative Adam Schiff, who represents California's 28th Congressional District. He is a legend. He's in his 11th term in the House of Representatives, and he's a member of Congress's investigation of the Jan. 6 insurrection. So we sat down on the cusp of the anniversary of the attempted coup, in a time in which all of the alarm bells are sounding that the end of democracy is a real and present danger. We talked about what Trump's ascendancy said and says about who we are as a nation, about what happened to the Republican Party and why it was so hard for there to be even just a few people who would stand up and speak out against what was happening. We talked about the spiritual crisis in our country, where literally millions of Americans today believe the Big Lie that the election was stolen in 2020 and are willing to take up arms in order to fight. We talked about the role of a stratified media in fueling a false narrative, and maybe the end of bipartisanship in our era. And we talked about the fierce urgency of now: what's at stake in this moment and how alarmed should we be? And what, if anything, can we do about it? Thank you so much for joining me for this important conversation.

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**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:01:27] I just want to say this book has been my constant companion for the last two weeks. It's been an incredible read and I'm so grateful to you for putting it all down in writing. I think for generations people will be turning to this book to really try to understand what we've all just experienced. So let me just start with a word of immense gratitude to you for the book and for all of your work.

I would love in our time to sit and talk together about your Jewish journey, which you describe so beautifully in Chapter two. But January 6th is before us. We are now one year from the violent breach of the Capitol. And I've been thinking about how, as Jews, we mark time commemorating when our enemies tried to destroy us, whether through enslavement or exile or genocide. And what we do is not only commemorate what we've lost and who we've lost, but also really make sure that we've learned the lessons of history and that we can pass them on, one generation to the next.

So as we come to January 6 and mark this terrible anniversary, we really wanted to take the opportunity to discuss with you—with grave urgency—not only what happened to America last year and in the years before that, but also the lessons that need to be learned as we continue to stand at the edge of the abyss. I really believe, as you do, that we are facing a dangerous and uncertain future right now. So I am especially grateful to you for helping bring us through this moment, this anniversary with some really deep awareness of how we got here and what we need to do moving forward.

So I start with my gratitude to you for that. Thank you so much.

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:03:24] Right back at you and I think you're absolutely right. One of the things that we seem to have forgotten over the last several decades is that the fight to preserve democracy is not over. It is not, as we, I think, came to believe in the post-World War Two generation and immutable law of nature that we always will be a democracy or that the world is moving in terms of towards greater democratization, greater liberalization, greater freedom, that the moral arc of the universe, says Martin Luther King said may be long, but it bends towards justice, only to find out at the moment it is not bending towards justice and there is nothing immutable about about that idea. And so we have learned, I think, a painful and difficult lesson over the last several years about just how precious and vulnerable democracy turns out to be.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:04:24] Your book is really a meticulous account of the last five years. The New York Times called this a blistering indictment of Trump and his Republican enablers. In many ways, he was unlike anyone who had ever come before and yet also the natural outgrowth of the party and the climate from which he emerged all at once. I wonder if you can reflect on what his ascendancy said and says about America.

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:05:34] Well, it's a really important question and a difficult one, because I think we do need to recognize that so many of the trends that were in motion prior to his coming into office were were present to to some degree we were going to go through this kind of turmoil. But he turned out to be really a supreme arsonist and made use of all of that dry timber to set us ablaze. But I think a number of things have contributed to where we are today. We are an increasing, increasingly small global economic world in which through automation, automation and globalization, millions and millions of people have lost their jobs and others are at risk of falling out of the middle class. And that has created, I think, a profound and global economic anxiety that demagogues have been able to play upon for years now, which is why we have seen a rise of autocracy predating Trump in places like Hungary and in Poland, the rise of far right parties in Austria, in Germany and France. The rise of dictatorships or wannabe dictators in the Philippines and Brazil and elsewhere. So I think it was a profound underlying economic challenges. The growing disparity in wealth in this country have made it fertile soil for demagogery. At the same time, we had these trends in terms of how we get our information now. We don't get our information from the same place as we did when I was a college kid and rushed home to see Walter Cronkite's last broadcast when we agreed on a large body of fact that we agree that were such things as fact. So these are some of the underlying conditions. But, you know, perhaps one of the most important underlying conditions here at home was was the nation's continuing struggle to deal with issues of race. And and we saw on January six those people paraded through the capital with Confederate flags and Auschwitz T-shirts that this was not just a Trumpist insurrection, but a white nationalist one as well. And and much as we witnessed after reconstruction, the recoil that lasted, you know, a century we are seeing again. And whether it was the election of Barack Obama or just the changing demographics of America. But we are once again seeing a backlash against the changing color of America. And and I think that contributes also to this really difficult, ugly, divided time in our history.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:08:26] Yeah, I'm really glad that you brought that up. I'm sure you saw Barton Gellman's recent piece in the Atlantic, arguing that the next coup has already begun. This is very much aligned with what you're writing and speaking about: January 6 was practice. And I'm astonished by these stats, but we now know that something like 36% of Americans think that the election was stolen, and among Republicans, it's close to 80% who believe that Biden didn't actually win the election. But

what's so interesting to me about what Barton Gellman writes and what you're saying now is that the only other common belief among the insurrectionists aside from that the election was stolen was that whites are in danger of being replaced by black and brown people. Most of the insurrectionists come from counties where the white population is in decline. They believe in the great replacement theory, which is this horrible European style anti-Semitism that's at the heart of the white nationalist lie. And you talk in the book about how Trump used this trope often as a dog whistle, even specifically in attacks against you. And it was very explicit on January 6 last year when he said: "You're the real people, you're the people who built this nation. So we have to fight and fight like hell, or we're not going to have a country anymore." It's so clear that racism, that white supremacist ideology is really the ideological foundation of the Big Lie. So, the question I have for you is that given that there are now, Gellman says, 21 million Americans who believe that violence is justified in overturning the election results, is our country prepared to address the true nature of this threat: White Christian nationalism? Is that something that we are actually prepared to address in the days ahead?

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:10:26] We have to hope and pray that we are ready to confront the ugly truth of how we got to where we are and the role that race plays in this and racism. So I hope that we are, you know, to me, though, it was almost unthinkable that we would get to the point where we are today. So much of what has happened over the last five years would have been unimaginable. And yet this happened. And I think, you know, one of our two great parties in this country has moved away from its commitment to democracy, to its former leader, its ideology of conservatism to essentially be an anti truth, autocratic cult of the former president and to embrace his ugly nativism, his ugly bigotry. You saw in the past other Republican presidents like George W. Bush, at least rhetorically try to embrace a broader vision of their party, a more inclusive vision of their party. But that gave a way to this ugly demagoguery, which is now the heart of that party. You know what? What Trump said in those rallies, what he says to this day is now echoed by Republican members of Congress, who are no longer the outliers. They are really more of the core than the outliers in the GOP. There's a reason why McCarthy and others won't confront QAnon. It's because it's now such a vital part of the GOP base. And, of course. Q and On gives home to these anti-Semitic tropes, these replacement theory forms of bigotry. And so are we ready to confront this? We have to confront it, whether we're ready or not, it has. It has infected one of one of our two great parties and a large part of the country, and I think we have to see it with open eyes.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:12:23] I want to ask you to describe what happened to your Republican colleagues. I felt reading the book as though I was witnessing the dissolution of a bad marriage in real time, especially in the early chapters. You talk about how some of these folks were people who you really respected and had good relationships with, and then you watched them succumb to the immorality of the president. And you said some of these were reasonably good faith actors at the outset of Trump's tenure, but they became foot soldiers to Trump and to Trump's White House. You talk about Nunez as he became "zombie like," Rod Rosenstein, Bill Barr. You have this incredibly thoughtful analysis—you say it's not that power corrupts, but that power reveals. And I wonder if you could just say a little bit more about what happened to these people at this time.

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:13:23] Well, this to me was really something that was untold about the last several years. That is we knew a lot about what was going on in the Trump White House, but we were not. I don't think the public was as aware of what was going on under the Dome of the Capitol and how we found so many people willing to enable his

immorality. And you're right, I worked with these people. I admired many of them because I believed that they believed what they were saying, and I would come to learn that either they didn't believe it at all or more likely, none of it mattered compared to what was most important to them, which was their ambition to hold their own. Their job in Congress, or maybe get a better job in the Senate or a cabinet position in Trump's White House. And I think the way that happens, the way you find good people allowing themselves to be so badly used is one small life. Followed by a bigger one? One small act of immorality, followed by a larger one? What Donald Trump did over four years is he would ask Republicans to come with him, with his lies, with his immorality and one step after another one one smallish indiscretion, followed by a larger one until they were so far in there was just no turning back. They had made their bed and now were forced to lie in it. And so, you know, you see these examples all the time. To me, among the most graphic illustration of the phenomenon that you mentioned about power revealing is if you look at the example of two members of Congress, Liz Cheney and Elise Stefanik, Liz Cheney, who is a person of considerable character and integrity and courage, who said, I will not carry this big lie if it cost me my position in leadership, it will cost me my position of leadership or my position in Congress. But I will not undermine our democracy to save my job. And on the other hand, you had Elise Stefanik, who put up her hand and said, Well, she won't tell the big lie. I will tell the Big Lie. I'll tell you why you need me to tell me so I can have her position. And sadly, I would learn that there were only two like Liz Cheney, and there were 200 like Elise Stefanik. And so I think we've learned a lot about people, a lot about particular people. Yes. But a lot about human nature. I should say, though, that one thing that really got me through this time is not the stories of capitulation, but the stories of great courage and heroism. Marie Yovanovitch is in the film *The Hills and the Alexander Vindman*, the people that stood up at the risk of their careers, sometimes facing down death threats when they did so. And one of the things that I found so interesting about this is many of those heroes of this period, like Yovanovitch and Vindman and Hill were immigrants to this country who have a certain ideal in mind about this country and vision that brought them here that they didn't take for granted and and they cherished. And the love of that ideal gave them strength and purpose and was part of their character. And to me, it demonstrated how many people who have chosen the United States were not born into this country but have chosen it because of what it represented. Understand the ideals of this country better than anyone.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:17:08] I've many times wondered what we could do to live into Alex Vindman's vision of what America is and could be? I remember there was an op ed in the *New York Times*— I don't remember who wrote it, right around the time of the election in 2016. I think it was called *A Few Good Men*, and it was essentially saying it will only take a few good Republicans to stand up and stop the Trump agenda. That's all we needed. Just a few good people of conscience. Unfortunately, there were fewer than even the few that we needed.

My daughter Eva became bat mitzvah the Shabbat a week after the 2016 election. And we talked about the rhinoceros, the story from Eugene Ionesco, which grew out of the Nazi takeover of Europe. The whole idea of the kind of spiritual disease that turns humans into hideous beasts because that's what's normative in the culture. And at the end of that play, the one guy who's left is shouting: I will not capitulate. I will not capitulate! It's Marie Yovanovitch as Alex Vindman. It's you.

And what you were witnessing in government, I will say we were witnessing a kind of micro version of this in faith communities around the country. We warned the Jewish community

right after the election: we are survivors of genocide. We need to decide: which side of history are we standing on? And I know that most of us would never actively support somebody who nods to authoritarianism. But there is a danger that we will accommodate evil with our silence because, you know, it's good for Israel or because of taxes or whatever other excuses. And it's really incredibly dangerous for us. I've been equally shocked in the non-governmental spaces to see how quickly otherwise decent, thoughtful people were able to silence their opposition as these injustices unfolded. And I know you're dealing with that every single day in the halls of Congress.

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:20:25] You're absolutely right, and I think this has been such a trying time in the faith community. I think it's very much a similar challenge among the press where you don't want to be Partizan as a member of the press or the faith community. At the same time, if you're going to call out people for lying, for aspiring to authoritarianism. You can't withhold it because of a desire not to appear Partizan. And and I think if it has been such a vexing time for so many of us, even apart from those communities, to see family members and neighbors avert their eyes or embrace this or rationalize their support for it and it, I'm sure it has broken up a great many families and friendships and neighborhoods. But this is a time, I think where we're all called upon. I, you know, I'm optimistic we're going to get through this, but I also have the conviction that what we do in this moment will determine how much damage we have to suffer along the way. And I feel the very same sense of urgency that you do both about our democracy and our planet. And so this is a critical moment where, you know, we have to be counted. The question that I have for my colleagues in Congress who I've watched over the last several years. What are you going to tell your children or grandchildren when they come to you one day and they say, you know, grandfather, grandmother, please tell me what you did when that awful man was running the country? Tell me you didn't sit still while he was putting kids in cages or. Well, this was going on. Please tell me you did something and I don't know what they're going to say. At one level. I can understand what they're doing. They're afraid of a primary or they're afraid of something else. But at another level, what's the point of being there? What's the point of being anywhere? If you're not willing to do the right thing when it really matters?

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:22:40] I think that's the question for all of us. What's the point of whatever power we have if we're not going to use it when the hour demands it?

We keep talking about urgency and I want to just put a fine point on it. You've said, Snyder said Barton Gellman has said that a failed coup attempt is really a rehearsal for whatever the next coup will be. And you said the system held, but it barely held. And now what they're striving for is kind of a more sophisticated version of a coup that will undermine our democracy. We know right now that these legislative efforts in every single state are— as you said— no less than an insurrection by other means. Right? The same forces that planned and executed Jan. 6 are hard at work today. Timothy Snyder wrote the other day something absolutely terrifying. He said, the candidate who loses by every measure, not just by the popular vote, but by the Electoral College, the candidate who loses by every measure will nevertheless be installed as president of the United States. He said “I think that's probably the most likely scenario in 2020 for the way that things stand now,” and that's absolutely terrifying. The most likely scenario is that the next election will not go to the person who has the most votes or even the most Electoral College votes. And he said, “we can lose democracy just like anyone else can. Just like most of the people in history have lost democracy. We can lose it and we're losing it now.”

I wonder, as a rabbi, as a mother, as an American, are we alarmed enough? Many of us are watching and we're saying, we have a little window right now where the White House and Congress and the Senate are all in the hands of the party that did not try to destroy democracy. The Justice Department. Why isn't more being done? And since you are on the commission that is actually doing the work right now, can you tell us, are we operating with the requisite sense of urgency at this moment?

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:25:06] No, not at all, and I would add to what you're saying that the worst case scenario is not that this would be autocrat wins in 2024, that Donald Trump is elected again in 2024. That's not the worst case scenario. The worst case scenario is that he loses and is nonetheless installed in power. And that is no, that is no. It's a purely speculative outcome that could very well happen indeed. That is what they are setting up to take place. And I don't know how we can be alarmed enough about this, as you say. And I think that the most vulnerable part of our democracy right now are these efforts around the country to strip independent elections officials of their duties and give them over to Partizan boards or Partizan legislatures so that they can overturn the election so that if they couldn't get the Georgia secretary of state to find eleven thousand seven hundred eighty votes that don't exist, they will have someone in that position next time who will. They are literally driving out of these positions. These local technocratic elections officials driving them out of town, often with death threats to be replaced by partisans, who will overturn or find thousands of votes that don't exist. And so we ought to, as a nation, realize that there is nothing inevitable about the continuation of this experiment that the founders placed such great faith in. And I think what is necessary really is a national movement to protect it, to save our democracy. There's not an easy legislative fix to what these Republican legislators are doing. In many ways, they're following the model of someone they hold up now as their champion, Viktor Orban, the wannabe dictator in Hungary. It's the use of the instruments of democracy to tear down the democracy itself. And so how do you respond to that when one party controls those legislatures through litigation? Certainly, but more importantly, through mass public action and awareness, a mass movement to save our democracy, I think nothing less will protect us right now.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:27:35] We know that one to two Democratic senators can and have and will probably continue to block any meaningful legislation to really protect the vote and other progressive causes which we're fighting with great urgency. So you're suggesting mass public action might be actually more effective than legislative action in order to protect the vote?

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:28:02] Well, look, I think the legislative action is vitally important. There's a handful of bills that I think are vital to the preservation of our democracy. But as you say, there are two senators right now who care more about an archaic rule that is not not a constitutional requirement by any means this filibuster. They care more about the maintenance of some kind of illusory vision of bipartisanship at a time where one of the two parties is no longer devoted to the same concept of democracy than they do about saving our democracy. And to me, it is really quite inexplicable. But that's where we are. And so I don't want to put all of our hopes in an epiphany by these two senators or a breakthrough by the president, much as I keep working towards that and hoping and praying for it. I think that we are going to have to work on Plan B, which is an all, you know, all out effort to overcome these Jim Crow laws. But equally important to call out pushback against these efforts to essentially use democracy against itself. We need to embrace and protect these local elections officials from the threats they're receiving so that they won't flee so that they will do their job. We have to encourage other people to take those jobs to

run for those jobs. It was not just Democrats, but a lot of well-meaning, courageous Republicans, Republican state elections officials and local elections officials who were a key part of the failsafe that held our democracy together during the last presidential election.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:29:53] And as you said, many of them are no longer in a position where they will have the power to do so in 2024.

You wrote that one thing that differentiated Trump's circumstances from Nixon's circumstances was the presence of Fox News and the whole information ecosystem that sustains Trumpism, no matter how corrupt it is. And you said that if Nixon had had Fox News, he would not have been forced to resign. I wonder what your thoughts are about how we can break through the the stratified media, as you say, and really reach the American people, not just with the truth, because I think it's clear that millions and millions of people don't actually care about the truth, but with a convincing narrative about what kind of action we need in order to build a truly just society.

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:30:54] Well, I would put Rupert Murdoch in the category of those who what are they going to say to their grandchildren? Yeah, about what, what they have wrought. I cannot believe, for example, that Rupert Murdoch does not understand that the election was not stolen. And yet there he is, profiting from primetime hours that continue to push these lies and deceive the American people. I guess at least one of his sons decided that he could no longer bear it. But this is one of the most cost cutting challenges facing the country, which is how we get our information. Part of it is through social media algorithms that choose and curate for us what we see and what we don't see based on what we like and don't like, share or don't share. That has, I think, served to balkanize us, make it more difficult for people to talk to each other, as well as proliferate these conspiracy theories. So how do we break through that? How do we break through the Fox bubble? How do we break through these algorithms when in terms of Fox, there's really not much of a legislative answer to that. And I think that the reality is it's going to have to happen one on one at the level of neighbor to neighbor, community to community. Sometimes that's the only way to get through. And it's really tough. It's really tough. You know, I've become a kind of a human focus group with people coming up to me in the airport, the first who will say, you know, are you Adam Schiff? I just want to shake your hand. You're my hero. And the next saying, you're not my hero. You lie all the time. Why do you lie all the time? And I look at these two people standing right next to each other, and I will say, I know what you're watching and I know you're watching, right? And it's not not the same thing because I'm the same person and I can't be both. But, sometimes, maybe even most of the time now it requires us all to engage with our own family members, with their own friends, to have those uncomfortable conversations because I don't know any other way, frankly, to break through.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:33:03] It's such a powerful message because there's so much social homogeneity right now, and I think people are really self-isolating because it seems like our ideological foes are really pose an existential threat to the world that we dream of building. And so what you're saying is very important for us to hear. I mean, the only way that we will be able to affect change is actually engaging people in these really difficult conversations.

You talk a lot about the threats that you and your staff and many of your colleagues face. You mentioned earlier what Marie Yovanovitch and Fiona Hill and Alex Vindman faced. I

am astonished by what you've been through and what you've and your family have been through over the course of the past many years. It should not be this way.

So I really want to thank you for your incredible service, and I really pray that you continue to find the strength and the moral courage to continue to do what you're doing.

And I want to end with a question about really what gives you the strength to persevere. Your book is called *Midnight in Washington*, and you say that you called it that because midnight is the darkest moment of the day. But in our tradition, in midrash tehillim, it says: When is it really dark? It's not midnight. It's the moment just before dawn because the Moon and the stars have set, but the Sun is yet to rise. And I'm afraid, as I read your book, that we are not in the darkest moment. We're in the moment that precedes the darkest moment. And yet I see people like you who every single day, you know, put on your suit and go out there and fight the good fight, even when you know that you're up against impossible odds. And so I really want to ask you: what gets you out of bed in the morning? What's the new story that needs to be written for America that you are helping us write right now.

**Rep Adam Schiff** [00:35:08] Well, the reason why I'm optimistic, notwithstanding considerable evidence to the contrary these days, is that there are millions of millions and millions more Americans who love and cherish our democracy. Then there are those who are trying to tear it down right now. And we cannot allow ourselves to fall into despair. We don't have the luxury of despair. We have to remain engaged. And look, I'd be kidding if I didn't say that some days are a lot tougher than others. And there were plenty of times over the last several years, and there will be plenty of times to come where the most I'll be able to do is get up in the morning and say, I just need to get through the day. I just need to get through the day. At the end of the day, I would say to myself, I'm still standing. And you know, sometimes you've got to take it that way one day at a time. But we should take it one day at a time with the confidence that we're going to get through this. We're a deeply resilient country filled with people, good people, loving people, caring people devoted to our democracy, all over all over 50 states. And so I think when you're in a crisis, it's tough to see what it's going to end. Sometimes it's tough to see, even if it's going to end, but this too shall pass. But we have our mission right now. And as you say, Rabbi, and what you said earlier reminded me of something that the speaker likes to say, which is know your own power. We all have the ability to influence our circumstances and those around us, and we can't all be Marie Yovanovitch first through the bridge, but we can all play our own role in helping to preserve our democracy at its most vulnerable hour and whether that hour now or that hour still to come. We all have a role to play, and I'm really enormously grateful for the role that you're playing, Rabbi.

**Rabbi Sharon Brous** [00:37:08] Thank you so much. I bless you with safety, health and with continued strength to keep doing this really important work for us and for all our children.

[PAUSE/ TRANSITION]

Thank you so much for joining us. If this is your first time with IKAR, I invite you to check out our website for more content, [www.ikar.org](http://www.ikar.org). You'll find all kinds of interesting sermons, learning conversations, guest lectures there, and we hope to one day even encounter you in person. Be well. Stay healthy. Take care.