

Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson  
Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York  
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5785

“Our Vision of Truth, Our Faith in Tomorrow”

We gather this Rosh Hashanah under a cloud of grave concern for Israel – its security, its safety, its future all at risk in an escalating, widening war. How relieved we are that, with American support, Israel withstood Iran’s most recent attack. But like the year just ended, the days ahead are uncertain and frightening for Israel and for the Jewish people.

At this anxious hour, we are grateful to be together in a fortress of faith like Temple Emanu-El. The enduring strength of its foundations braces us with courage to enter a New Year hopeful of better days, and fortifies our commitment to the welfare of our people and our country, a commitment I want to talk about this morning.

Of all my duties at Temple Emanu-El, none brings me greater joy than teaching our Confirmation Class – generally a small group, not the size of the classes many of us grew up with in an age before the myriad extracurricular demands our kids face today. Last year’s class was extraordinary, with regard to the participants, who happened all to be young women, and the historic context, as Israel’s war against Hamas and the spate of antisemitism in America became throughlines of our conversations.

Each spring at the Confirmation ceremony, I ask the students to share their spiritual autobiographies recalling the evolution of their Jewish identities, anticipating how Judaism will guide them forward. Every year their statements are thoughtful. But last year’s were especially poignant, as these young women spoke candidly about present-day concerns that imperil their futures including access to abortion and reproductive health, and their security as Jews in the world at large and on the college campuses they soon will inhabit. Their apprehension was apparent, but so was their determination to stand up for what they believe, and for who they are.

Then my turn came to address them. I was suddenly overcome by a profound sadness, and I began to weep. The world they are entering is terrifying. Everything, everywhere, all at once is unravelling. “When did being a Jew make me a target?” they must be wondering. “Am I safe...not just as a Jew but as an American? Could the school shootings all over the country happen at my school? Will this planet be habitable for my children?”

Collecting myself, I shared with them a legend about Abraham.

The patriarch arrived at Mount Moriah, where we find him this morning preparing to sacrifice Isaac, having come from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants were deceitful and violent. They murdered, even their own children. Abraham would preach to them, rail against their wickedness. Day after day he would beseech them to lift their hearts to the God of justice and peace. He was tireless; he would not be silenced.

One day a stranger challenged him: “Why do you continue speaking when no one listens?” And Abraham answered, “At first I spoke to change these people. Perhaps one day I shall. For now, I speak so they don’t change me.”

What I was trying to tell the Confirmation kids, and what I want to say to you this morning, is that when the world feels out of control, when we might even begin to question the cornerstones upon which we have laid our values and our hopes, that is precisely the moment we

need to affirm with even greater conviction, embrace with even greater tenacity those very ideals and beliefs. We can't surrender them. Too much is at stake – for this country, for Israel, and for the Jewish people.

### *For America*

“What does it mean to be a Jew?” our prayer book asks. “To hold fast to our vision of truth, to retain our faith in tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup>

For America's sake, we must hold fast to our vision of truth.

We can debate policy. The challenge is that as Americans we are bifurcating into two distinct electorates with often irreconcilable perceptions of reality seen through diverging moral lenses. Religious, social, and political philosophies can cause us to view the same world quite differently. And when facts collide with dogma, dogma generally prevails in bending facts to its purpose.<sup>2</sup>

While this is true of both conservatism and liberalism, many Americans are afraid because they know the personal freedoms at stake when, in state houses and court houses across the country, politicians and judges substitute ideology for evidence and expertise.<sup>3</sup> Yes, access to abortion, the right to which my colleagues and I have explained is firmly rooted in Jewish text; but also to invitro fertilization and comprehensive sex education; and hard won equal rights for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The stability of our governing institutions too is in jeopardy. American democracy depends on our city, state and federal governments operating ethically, jurists and officials serving impartially, without conflicts of interest,<sup>4</sup> such as those for which our mayor was indicted. And American democracy depends on the peaceful transfer of power, and faith in free and fair elections – a confidence now undermined not by evidence but by repeated aspersion.

Disagreement is part of politics of course. At its constructive best, it sharpens our thinking and identifies common ground. I always admired the late Senator Howard Baker, who never forgot the lesson his father, the Tennessee Congressman, taught him: “You should go through life...working under the assumption that the other fellow may be right,”<sup>5</sup> that neither liberals nor conservatives have all the answers.

But recent elections have been marred by a vindictiveness trampling any sense of civility. The horrifying assassination attempts against former President Trump didn't come out of nowhere. How terrifying to consider what might have been, and how our national discourse has descended into hatred that could engender such violence.

Open hostility to fact, repetition of falsehoods, calling opponents enemies to be eliminated can no longer be brushed aside as harmless rhetoric. And no matter how legitimate the concerns about the border, the scapegoating of immigrants to stoke fear; and the singling out of one community, the Jewish community, two percent of the population, as responsible for an election's outcome, summon menacing nativist, racist and antisemitic tropes, and we cannot excuse it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chaim Stern, *Gates of Repentance*, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, “MAGA vs. Science is No Contest,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Lydia Polgreen, “The Strange Report Fueling the War on Trans Kids,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny*, p.39.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Haltom, Jr., *The Other Fellow May Be Right: The Civility of Howard Baker*.

Some may want to throw up their hands in disgust. But no matter how ugly American politics have become, we must remain engaged. As activist and political scientist Leonard Fein reminded us, “In the era of the modern state, there is no path to the fulfillment of Jewish interests and ideals that does not lead through the halls of government.”<sup>6</sup> What we do, or don’t do, now through Election Day will determine the character of the nation and the nature of the society we leave for our children and their children.

### *For Israel*

For Israel, too, we must hold fast to our vision of truth and speak it, however complicated and painful.

The moment we learned Hamas had slaughtered twelve hundred Israelis and captured two hundred fifty, most American Jews acknowledged a responsibility only we could fulfill. “There are different ways to defend the Jewish people,” one Israeli soldier explained when I visited Israel a few weeks later. He and his comrades in arms would fight courageously in Gaza. Israeli citizens would care for the families of the slain and the captive and the hundreds of thousands forced to flee Hamas and Hezbollah rockets. Our role would be repudiating claims of moral equivalency comparing Hamas’s barbarism with Israel’s efforts to protect its land and its people; and clarifying for the mindless that self-defense is not retaliation, and that Hamas’s murderous rampage could not be contextualized as acceptable resistance to occupation.

And then, as the war intensified and innocent Palestinians were dying by the thousands, again it fell to us, always with compassion for the suffering in Gaza, to explain the intractable challenges Israel faced, each complicated by the next: rescuing the hostages, eliminating Hamas as an ongoing threat without endangering those hostages, all while protecting Palestinians and Gaza’s infrastructure from further harm – an impossibility of course because Hamas deliberately guarantees civilian casualties by hiding and operating among them.

And now we must remind the world that Hezbollah’s arsenal is ten times greater, significantly more advanced, and that the Iranian-backed terror group has been firing on Israel almost daily since Hamas’s invasion. Nine thousand rockets have chased sixty thousand Israelis from their homes in the north. Many of those rockets Hezbollah hides in and under civilian homes (just like Hamas), where its leaders convene surrounded by human shields (just like Hamas). Beneath one Beirut apartment complex Hezbollah commanders were finalizing plans for their own October 7-style invasion when the IDF found and killed them. Hassan Nasrallah was killed headquartered beneath another. When Israel urged those in the line of fire to evacuate, Lebanon’s information minister told them to ignore the warnings.<sup>7</sup> And it is Hezbollah who violated the UN Resolution requiring they withdraw from Israel’s border, which is why Israeli soldiers have now gone in, and tragically the first of them have already died.

With all these supporting arguments, and the world safer with Hamas and Hezbollah weakened and Nasrallah dead, why has defending Israel in the court of world opinion been so challenging? Primarily because that court has always been stacked against Israel.

---

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America’s Jews*.

<sup>7</sup> Emanuel Fabian, “Israel Hits 1,600 Targets in Monday Strikes on Hezbollah as Lebanese Flee; 492 Killed,” *The Times of Israel*, September 23, 2024.

But if we are speaking the truth, certain legitimate criticisms of Israel's government we should acknowledge. On October 7, Israel's government failed in its most basic duty to keep Israelis safe, preoccupied as it was with the authoritarian power grab it benignly labeled judicial reform. Then despite all best intentions to protect Gaza's civilians, its subsequent bombing campaign left thousands of innocents dead. In the West Bank, settler hooligans attack Palestinians with impunity because the government often neglects to prosecute. And the IDF, in its efforts to root out terrorists there, however necessary, has left behind destruction and despair.

Meanwhile, one hundred captives languish in the tunnels beneath the wreckage of Gaza – those who have not already perished. Israel has, these last two weeks, accomplished remarkable military and intelligence feats. But the fate of the hostages remains Israel's open wound. When Hamas executed the six a month ago, hundreds of thousands protested against Prime Minister Netanyahu and businesses around the country went on strike.

It is not easy for one who loves Israel as I do to say these things. Because I also believe our criticism should be tempered by humility appropriate our distance from Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthi, and Iranian missiles. And we should always consider where Israel teeters on the seesaw of world opinion. With the rest of the world already condemning Israel as we saw at the UN last week, someone needs to defend it.

Nor can we forget what we witnessed on college campuses across America: intimidating, sometimes violent demonstrations, frequently spurred on by outside influences, often by faculty, but attended by students, many of whom know very little Mideast history. Their demonization of Israel may have appeared irrational, but as *The Times of Israel's* David Horowitz pointed out, it was really quite intentional. The aim was to paint Israel as morally indefensible and unworthy of support; and to render it physically indefensible by convincing universities and companies to withhold investment, and the United States to cut military aid.<sup>8</sup>

### *For the Jewish People*

We cannot permit such antisemitism that masquerades as righteous critique to go unchallenged. We must hold fast to and speak the truth. And here it's not so complicated.

Calls for an "intifada revolution," the glorification of Hamas, assertions that "Zionists don't deserve to live" – these are not protests against Israel's government, or even its treatment of the Palestinians. They are protests against Israel's existence.

And protests against Israel's existence are protests against Jewish existence. Half of world Jewry lives in Israel. Had Israel become a state ten years earlier, one-third of world Jewry might have been saved. Calls for Jews to "Go back to Poland" are a reminder that for some, Jews are tolerable only when vulnerable and weak.

Early in Israel's response to October 7, even before the Palestinian death toll began to mount, we awoke to a reality we should have anticipated because we had seen it before: how hatred of Israel is intertwined with hatred of Jews.

The tearing down of posters of the hostages and the physical assaults on Jews whose dress so identified them represented the inversion of a subterfuge long employed by antisemites on the left, who to disguise and sanitize their hatred of Jews, would rhetorically attack Israel. But last fall their anti-Zionist masks came off, and the antisemitism beneath revealed itself.

---

<sup>8</sup> David Horowitz, "The Goal of the Campus Jew-Haters: To Render Israel Indefensible, in Both Senses of the Word," *The Times of Israel*, April 24, 2024.

A decade ago, the Jew-hatred we physically feared came from the far right, from white nationalists and replacement theorists like Robert Bowers who murdered eleven at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue; and from Islamist extremists, like the ISIS sympathizer apprehended at the Canadian border planning to slaughter Jews in Brooklyn. Until recently, the antisemitism of the left still operated primarily through boycotts, divestment, sanctions, and other insidious channels. It hid beneath the surface in social exchanges and academic spaces. Not anymore. Now it too has emerged, intimidating and menacing, and claiming a right to free expression.

In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that the stamp of a liberal society is to allow "that all points of view are equal...all opinions...permitted."<sup>9</sup> "But," Sartre counters, "I refuse to characterize as opinion a doctrine that is aimed directly at particular persons and that seeks...to exterminate them."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the presidents of Harvard, MIT and Penn should have reread Sartre before appearing on Capitol Hill. But pinning those elite universities' troubles with antisemitism on today's administrators alone ignores decades of abuse. The college campus has long been home to activists who conflate the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with other liberation struggles and implicate Israel's Jewish supporters in every societal injustice. And for even longer, the academy has harbored educators who exploit the lectern as a pulpit to inveigh against Israel, some employing the grotesque antisemitism of Holocaust inversion characterizing Israel as the Third Reich, others demonizing Israel as a colonialist regime, as if Jewish families who have been living on the land for centuries, or those who arrived from DP Camps had some other home to go back to.

As our member, Stanford professor Emily Levine explained in *The New York Times* last month, many progressive educators today teach about the world as a contest between oppressor and oppressed.<sup>11</sup> And as Natan Sharansky noted, "progressives see Israel as an oppressor and Jews as members of the privileged class"<sup>12</sup> and therefore beyond the reach of prejudice other minorities face.

Tell me: since when is it a privilege to fear for one's safety wearing a Star of David or a yarmulke in public? Or to spend millions on security churches fortunately don't have to? Where is the progressive critique of this inequity? And where was the #MeToo movement, a groundbreaking progressive effort, when it became clear that Israeli women, and men too, had been raped, their genitals mutilated, by Hamas thugs? Is it really #MeToo Unless You're a Jew? Perhaps progressives fail to recognize their blind spot for antisemitism because the suggestion of bias challenges their self-perception as fighters against injustice. So the problem must be with the Jews themselves.

Last October, shortly after the seventh, I was approached by parents who perceived their children's elementary, middle and high schools as failing to acknowledge our pain with the same moral clarity evident in those same schools' responses to other recent tragedies. It seemed to them a double standard was at work. Additionally, some of their older children were reporting social exclusion and politicization of the classroom. And younger children were describing feeling lonely among their non-Jewish classmates.

---

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, p.9.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Brest and Emily J. Levine, "D.E.I. Is Not Working on College Campuses. We Need a New Approach," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Natan Sharansky, "Our False Partners," *Tablet*, December 18, 2023.

And then in December the college students returned for winter break, and I began to hear firsthand of the vicious bullying and academic bias some of them were encountering. Being a Jew on campus had become an act of courage. Indeed, according to an ADL/Hillel survey, seventy-three percent of Jewish students claim to have seen or experienced antisemitism in the aftermath of Hamas's attack. Prior to October 7, sixty-four percent said they had felt comfortable revealing their Jewish identity; after October 7, only thirty-nine percent did. That is America today.

*“Love Him Even More”*

And that, sadly, is the world those Confirmation students are inheriting, and why I wept as I addressed them.

In Rembrandt's magnificent portrayal of this morning's Torah portion, Abraham's eyes are filled with tears<sup>13</sup> as he prepares to sacrifice Isaac. In the painting, an angel stays Abraham's hand. In the Torah, God commands Abraham to release his son. The frightening tale is our tradition's repudiation of the ritual slaughter of children once commonplace, and a reminder that nothing is inevitable – not when we listen to and act on the values we know to be right and true. This is the moment.

As Americans in an election season we must distinguish truth from falsehood. Our own people's experience, past and present, demands it. And if we care, really care about the array of critical issues at stake, we should be out there registering voters as many of you are; and assisting at election sites as non-partisan monitors as many of you do; and making sure that we, and our children, and our grandchildren vote.

A father once came to the *Baal Shem Tov* asking what he should do about his son who had forsaken the path of Torah. The *Besht* answered, “love him even more.”

We can't give up on America. We have to love it even more.

And we have to love Israel even more. We must never allow Israel to be held to double standards, demonized or delegitimized as the historic homeland of the Jewish people. We must decry anti-Israel bias in the media. We must insist our high schools do a better job teaching the complex history of the Arab-Israeli conflict so their graduates won't be hoodwinked by anti-Israel forces on the campus quad or anti-Zionist professors in the college classroom.

And no matter how we align politically, we must not permit Israel to be abused as a partisan wedge. When Donald Trump suggests that Jews who love Israel must vote for him or be considered disloyal, and increasing numbers of Democrats treat Israel as a political liability, essential bipartisan support for the only Jewish state is jeopardized and the Jewish community is divided precisely by what should unite us.

But even as we speak out for Israel and pray for its security and the safety of its brave soldiers, we must never relinquish our hope for peace. As Tal Becker, who defended Israel against genocide charges in The Hague, writes: “We must emerge from this testing moment recommitted to a future, however difficult to achieve, in which the peoples of the Middle

---

<sup>13</sup> Joanna Sheers Seidenstein, “Rembrandt and the Unseen: Perception and Revelation in the Abraham Narrative,” *Divine Encounter: Rembrandt's Abraham and the Angels*, p.16.

East...do not see their own welfare and thriving as requiring the demise of the other”<sup>14</sup> – the sacrifice of the other.

And we must love the Jewish people. Yes, we must always be messengers of *tikkun olam*, “repair of the world,” but also of *klal Yisrael*, “Jewish solidarity.” Despite what those who smeared Governor Shapiro as “Genocide Josh” deceitfully insinuate, or what campus agitators who exclude Jews from social justice causes falsely maintain, the two imperatives – *ahavat Yisrael*, “love for our people,” and *ahavat habriot*, “love for all people” – do not conflict. Rather our passion for universal justice is fired by our particular Jewish experience.

I have been asked whether Jews should continue to support and send our children to these esteemed colleges and universities that so failed the Jewish community. My answer is yes! Generations before us labored to get us and our children into these schools. Let’s not cede that achievement. And if we believe in their educational missions, even if they have messed up badly, we should continue to invest in them with the clear expectation that our gifts be used to address our concerns. If we leave the conversation altogether, we lose our voice in the debate. And I believe we are more than strong enough to hold our own.

### *To Bear Witness*

The rabbis teach that sometime after Isaac was unbound from the altar and the ram sacrificed in his place, Abraham returned to the mountaintop, and cried out: “God, I would like to have a word with you.”

“What is it Abraham?”

“God, is it not true that you know what is in a person’s heart?”

“Yes, Abraham, I know what is in every person’s heart.”

“Then you knew that I would not have withheld my son from you!”

“Yes, I knew you would not have withheld your son from me.”

“Then why, God, would you have Isaac suffer such a fright? Why would you put me through such a trial?”

“Because, Abraham, I needed you as a witness.”

A witness to what? To the necessity of challenging the world as it is for the sake of the world as it ought to be.

Now, from Moriah’s peak, God calls us to bear witness. To bear witness to a message of hope. To go down to the valley below, and preach that message tirelessly, never to be silenced.

To hold fast to our vision of truth, to retain our faith in tomorrow.

Because that is what it means to be a Jew.

---

<sup>14</sup> Tal Becker, “The Day After Tisha B’Av,” *The Times of Israel*, August 12, 2024.