

ROSH HASHANA 5787 – FIRST DAY (5787.2)
September 12, 2026

Last December, Ruthie and I travelled to Israel as we now do twice a year. After more than thirty trips to Israel, our visits are less about touring and more about seeing family.

Amazingly, even in a small country like Israel, we always find places we have never visited. For example, hidden behind a highway gas station was an Australian park, complete with dozens of kangaroos and other exotic creatures. We also managed to watch a streaming series that many people had been telling me about called “Nobody Wants This.”

Of course, there are plenty of films, streaming series and TV shows which focus on Jews and Judaism. Most score much higher in Hollywood content than accurate Jewish content.

This one, however, was different. It dealt with the well-known issue of interfaith relationships in an American Jewish community. What made this series unique is that it was the rabbi who was involved in the interfaith relationship.

Ruthie and I would usually watch a couple of episodes, then I would work on proofing a manuscript for a novel given to me by a journalist I have known since

rabbinical school. Knowing my penchant for grammar and proofreading, she asked me to review her 350-page text.

Like “Nobody Wants This,” the novel revolved around an interfaith relationship. It followed a Jewish travel writer involved in a passionate relationship with a talented artist from Austria, who used to be a Catholic seminary student. The novel deeply examines Austrian culture, particularly its historic saturation with antisemitism.

Though often termed the world’s most ancient hatred, antisemitism has surged in recent years. Historically, many people inherited antisemitism from their parents or their pews. The latest surge coincided with Israel’s strong response to the murder of 1,200 people and the kidnapping of 251 more near Gaza on October 7, 2023.

Though classic antisemitism linked Jews with money, much of the current spike seems to have been inspired by a multi-billion dollar campaign of hate funded by Qatar and other Arab nations. As millions of young people drink in antisemitism online and in their universities, Jewish communities worldwide are experiencing the highest levels of hatred and violence since the Holocaust.

Gone are the days when so many antisemites were low-life bigots. The current wave of antisemitism is particularly alarming because it has become trendy, like “Occupy Wall Street,” The Me-Too Movement” and” Black Lives Matter.”

In theory, one can make an intellectual distinction between the terms “anti-Zionism” and “antisemitism.” However, the reality is that the venom and violence inspired by the term “anti-Zionism” shows that it is merely a more socially-acceptable term for “antisemitism.”

Few of these nouveau antisemites who preach “Free Palestine” have ever learned the history of Palestine. Many do not seem to know which river and sea their hate-filled rants refer to (by the way, the correct answer is the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea). As such, they are easily manipulated by a small core of well-funded influencers who prey on their passion and their ignorance, the two main ingredients of classic antisemitism and other forms of bigotry.

I understand that most of you do not require a Rosh Hashana sermon to alert you to the increase in antisemitism. You don’t need me to detail the violent and hateful acts in the streets of New York, Toronto, Europe and elsewhere. You are all too aware of the hateful words coming from political leaders, entertainers, online influencers and others.

A famous rabbinic story teaches that one can kill with words, as well as with a sword. Our community has mourned as killers inspired by these words have attacked synagogues, kosher restaurants, supermarkets, houses of worship and Jews on the street.

We have been horrified at how a terrorist recently came within yards of one hundred twenty nursery-school students at a suburban Detroit temple. We have watched as Jewish authors, scholars, entertainers and athletes are blackballed by their own professional institutions.

So many of the voices of hatred claim that antisemitism is our own fault. They claim that being Jewish makes us supporters of the evil, racist and hateful ideology of Zionism.

Now, to my knowledge, I have never been called evil, racist or hateful. Yet I stand before you this morning proudly proclaiming that I am a Zionist. I also reject the ludicrous characterization of Zionism being spread by those filled with passionate hatred, yet bereft of knowledge.

Not only am I a Zionist, I fail to understand how any self-respecting Jew who is knowledgeable of our history, would not be a Zionist. Zionism simply means believing in the right of the Jewish people to have a land of our own in the land where we have dwelled for nearly four thousand years.

Zionism understands that the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel dates back almost 1,800 years before the birth of Jesus and about 2,400 years before the birth of Mohammed. When we look at how our people has been persecuted in different lands throughout history, why would any Jew not want a refuge to be available?

Anti-Zionists often proclaim Jews to be colonizers, though we have lived in Israel longer than any other people. It would be far more accurate to proclaim America, Great Britain, France, Spain and many other nations to be colonizers than Israel. Yet, the essence of antisemitism has always been holding the Jews to a standard which one refuses to apply to anyone else.

Being a patriotic American does not mean that one agrees with the policies of a particular American administration. Similarly, being a Zionist does not mean that one agrees with the policies of a particular Israeli government. Criticizing the government of Israel and its policies is not inherently antisemitic. In Israel, it's actually a national obsession.

On October 27, Israelis will vote to elect a new Knesset and a Prime Minister. It's what free and open societies do. Those proclaiming "Free Palestine" should learn that Palestinian leaders in both the West Bank and Gaza have not held an election in over twenty years.

(They actually scheduled one for November and just announced this week that we don't think that's going to be happening; we have to postpone it and we'll let you know when)

Like the streaming series and the novel which both dealt with a complicated relationship, an election asks us to define ourselves. Who are we and who do we want to become?

The current government in Israel is very unpopular, both inside and outside of Israel. That is not an indictment of Zionism, but of the current administration. In fact, during the upcoming Israeli election, millions of Zionists will pointedly choose not to vote for the current Zionist government.

Be they right wing, left wing or in the center, Israelis understand what Zionism is and what it is not far better than their detractors. Israelis understand that Benjamin Netanyahu is the current Prime Minister, he is not the definition of Zionism. The same was true of Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Menachem Begin, Golda Meir and all the others. They held different views, yet they were all Zionists.

Zionism simply means that it is our right to live in the land which has defined Jewish history for close to four thousand years. Israel is the land God promised

Abraham in this morning's Torah portion. It is where King David established Jerusalem as his capital over three thousand years ago and where his son, King Solomon built the First Temple fifty years later.

Zionism means believing in the right of Jews to live in the land where the Maccabees fought history's first war for religious freedom 2,200 years ago, where our rabbis and sages reinvented Judaism after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in the year 70.

Zionism means believing that it is our right to continue to live in the land where we died en masse at Masada 1,953 years ago. Zionism means that despite all the persecutions, massacres, edicts, expulsions, inquisitions and more, we have the right to the land which has had a continuous Jewish presence for nearly four thousand years. Anyone who claims that Jews are colonists or interlopers is either ignorant of our history or afraid of it.

One hundred thirty years ago, modern Zionism was the response of Theodor Herzl to the antisemitism he witnessed in France at the trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Herzl, like others of his day, realized that Jews could never escape antisemitism without a land of their own.

The nations of the world recognized this as well. In November 1917, Great Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, recognizing the right of Jews to a

homeland in Israel, until political pressure made them backtrack. Thirty years later, the United Nations endorsed Zionism when it voted to establish a Jewish nation in half of Palestine, with the other half going to the Arabs. The Jews accepted the offer, while the Arab world rejected it.

More than two dozen nations define themselves, in their constitutions, as based on Islam. That is all well and good. There is only one nation in the world which defines itself based on Jewish values. That is another reason why Zionism remains so critical.

Israel can make us kvell and Israel can make us cringe. Often, it does both simultaneously. Whether or not you view Israel as a source of inspiration and identity, there is no question but that it is a proven safety net for Jews worldwide.

In 1948, following its creation, Israel took in well over a million refugees from Europe, northern Africa and the Middle East. Israel absorbed close to a million oppressed Soviet Jews as well as one hundred thousand Ethiopian Jews escaping persecution. The origins of the Jews immigrating to Israel changes over the years, with the largest number now coming from France. Should the situation in America continue to deteriorate, who knows if we will be next?

When I started out as a rabbi in Worcester, Massachusetts, I was counseling a couple. The man was clearly psychologically disturbed. However, he was a master manipulator, who had convinced his fiancée that she was the one with the problem. That encounter led this young rabbi to view communication differently. I began to focus not only on the message, but on the technique being used to deliver the message.

Almost a century ago, a notorious nazi leader promoted the concept of the big lie by noting that the bigger the lie and the more often one tells it, the more people will begin to believe it. Though we live in an age of unrivaled access to information, not all that information is accurate. It is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, but it is also vital to understand who took the picture and how it was set up.

Freedom of speech is a blessing, but people often confuse feelings with facts. While both can be validated, facts and knowledge are usually better indicators of truth than a person's emotions.

As such, on this day of judgement, I urge us all to work harder to combat our own ignorance and apathy. The best defense against antisemitism is to understand who we are as a people, as well as who we intend to become as a community.

The Jewish people has a historic commitment to righteousness, to justice and to compassion. Throughout that history, we have been vilified because we represented a challenge to corrupt leadership. We shone the light of integrity on the darkness of prejudice and hatred. We taught that “in a place where no one displays humanity, you must strive to be human.”

Our teachings formed the basis for everything from the American legal system to the religious values shared by billions of people around the world. We are far from perfect, but our communal goal is to improve upon God’s creation and to bring about a better world for all God’s children.

Antisemitism is the antithesis of these values and goals. It is a philosophy of destruction and hatred. We can best combat these and the other evils of our day by understanding, appreciating and acting upon the highest values of our Jewish tradition. May the sound of the shofar inspire us to do better. “Let us learn in order to teach; let us learn in order to do.”

Working with one another and with people of all faiths and backgrounds, we can stand strong against the forces of hatred and bigotry which are flourishing in our world. May we be blessed to bring about the day of which the prophet Isaiah spoke, when “they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against others, nor shall they train for war anymore.” AMEN

(final edits made 09/19/2026)