

Rabbi Rachel Joseph
 Congregation Beth Israel
 Kol Nidre 5786
 Judaism is Not About Antisemitism: Blessing and Being Blessed

“Y’varechecha Adonai v’yishmerecha
 May God bless you and keep you.
 Ya’er Adonai panav eilecha vichunecha
 May God’s light shine upon you and shine through you.
 Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v’yasem lecha shalom
 May God lift up God’s face to you, and grant you peace.”¹

This ancient blessing, the Priestly Benediction, spoken at baby namings, b’nei mitzvah, weddings, and holidays, isn’t just a lifecycle blessing, it’s a call to be Jewish: to be kept, to shine, to lift your face as a proud Jew. And yet many of us feel the opposite; we feel kept in fear, light dimmed, faces lowered. So, tonight, I want to speak about what keeps us down: antisemitism². And, also, what lifts us up: Judaism.

Yes, antisemitism it's real. Yes, it's scary. And, I want to say clearly: Judaism is not about antisemitism. Judaism is not defined by what others do to us. Judaism is defined by what we do -- with our mitzvot, our rituals, our community, our joy. We don’t fight antisemitism, we live our Judaism.

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the Jewish toolbox.³ Tonight that toolbox becomes not just helpful, but essential.

We know that antisemitism is not a glitch in history but a chronic condition. It flares up whenever societies go through identity crises: Spain in 1492, Russia in the 1880s, Germany in the 1930s, and yes, now in our age of artificial intelligence, social media, and global upheaval.

Yes, the war in Israel and Gaza has only intensified this moment. Suddenly, wearing a Magen David, Star of David necklace, feels risky. Having a mezuzah hanging on your door feels dangerous. Posting anything about Israel online feels like navigating a minefield.

But, let me be clear: Israel and Gaza did not cause antisemitism. Antisemitism has always been there, lurking beneath the surface. This moment has exposed it, has reminded us how quickly we

¹ Torah, Book of Number 6:24-26. Creative translation by Rabbi Michael Cahana and Rabbi Rachel Joseph.

² There is still debate over whether to hyphenate antisemitism or not. I’m following Dr. Debroah Lipstadt’s policy to exclude the hyphen. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/anti-semitism-or-antisemitism>

³ https://cdn.bethisrael-pdx.org/docs/content/RH_5786_Our_Jewish_Toolbox.pdf

can become the other, how easily centuries of progress can feel fragile. How fast we can move from safety to fear.

Our community is being tested on campuses, in city councils, in coffee shops and online. Many of us feel stuck trying to navigate our politics, our commitments to justice, and our identity as Jews.

Writer David Wolfowicz uses the metaphor that antisemitism is like an alarm clock. It doesn't define us. It wakes us up. "What I want to propose is that antisemitism is simply one expression of chosenness -- the reality that Jews are perpetually marked as different, whether they choose that difference or not. When Jews experience this form of chosenness, they can treat it as either something that is happening to them, which leads them to fight it, or something happening for them: as an alarm reminding them of their chosenness. ... The choice facing Jews is therefore not whether to assimilate, which they can never fully do. It is whether to shape an identity based on passive otherness or to engage in active chosenness."⁴

For us as Reform Jews, "chosenness" has always been a hard word. We've pushed against any hint of superiority, and rightly so. But chosenness in Torah is not "chosen over," it is "chosen for." In our movement's language, I hear chosenness as more responsibility and more obligation. The question isn't "are we better?" but "are we useful?" -- will we keep, will we shine, will we lift -- so that our particular path becomes a blessing for the wider world.

Tonight, I'm asking us to double down on our Judaism -- to lift our heads and live as Jews. And to guide us, I want to reclaim the ancient tool of the Priestly Benediction not as just a life-cycle blessing, but as a defiant anthem and a practical roadmap. When the alarm sounds, when antisemitism tries to make us bow our heads in shame or fear, this blessing reminds us: we are meant to be lifted up.

"Y'varechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha
May God bless you and keep you.

When the world grows hostile, when our children hesitate to show their Jewishness, the answer is not to close the toolbox but to open it wider. Keeping – yishmerecha – is how we steady ourselves: if God keeps us, then our response is to keep Judaism publicly and persistently.

And something remarkable is happening: as we keep showing up, our keeping is beginning to spread. Since October 7th, something unprecedented has happened. While antisemitism has surged, so has Jewish engagement. Conversion classes are full. Synagogue attendance is up. Our

⁴ David Wolfowicz, Judaism Is Not About Antisemitism, Sapir Journal, Summer 2025, <https://sapirjournal.org/chosenness/2025/judaism-is-not-about-antisemitism/>

religious school is overflowing. People who haven't set foot in a synagogue since their bar mitzvah are suddenly asking: "Rabbi, how do I learn Hebrew? How do I observe Shabbat? How do I teach my kids about being Jewish?"

The alarm of antisemitism didn't send people running away from Judaism. It sent them running toward it.

Why? Because in a moment of crisis, people remembered what they always knew but had perhaps forgotten: Judaism is not a burden. Judaism is a blessing.

And, I don't want to minimize the fear. Fear is real, and I've felt that fear. I've felt myself holding my breath many times this year. Ever since I started here 13 years ago, I have marched with CBI in the Gay Pride parade, from pushing my kids in a stroller to watching them invite their Jewish friends to march with us. I love the Pride parade. Yet this year, I felt particularly scared. I wondered how exposed we would feel as a Jew. Would we be harassed? Would there be violence? My wife, Sara, wore a T-shirt with a giant Star of David and one word, "Proud," and my stomach clenched. I was nervous.

But here's the truth: Sara wore the right shirt; the answer is not to hide, the answer is to double down; to remind ourselves that being Jewish is not a liability but a gift. And, it's a really hard reminder. I'm sure every family here has a story of fear; a time when it was easier to hide.

I had another experience just a few weeks ago. Our synagogue hosted an event, called the Turnaway Play, about access to abortion. If you know me, you know I believe access to reproductive healthcare is a religious right rooted in our Jewish values. So, of course we would host this event!

Naturally, I reached out to a local abortion rights organization to be a co-sponsor of the event and recipient of the fundraising. And they said no.

Why? They told us, "Our values don't align."

But of course our values align on reproductive freedom. It's actually one of the few Jewish values that align even for more traditional Jewish communities. What they really meant was: you're Jews. You're too complicated. You support Israel. We don't want to partner with you.

And so the temptation is to make Judaism smaller. To hide our contradictions, our complexity, our questions about Israel's policies alongside our commitment to Jewish survival.

But Yom Kippur asks the opposite. Tonight asks us: What are we living for? What are we willing to claim, out loud, as our identity?

I can critique Israeli policies and still believe in Jewish self-determination. I can question decisions made by Israel's government and still light Shabbat candles with pride. I can hold the pain of Palestinian suffering and still celebrate Jewish joy.

And, I do not owe anyone an explanation of my politics to be allowed to be a proud Jew.

This complexity -- this refusal to be reduced to simple slogans -- is not a weakness. It's a strength. It's what it means to be a people who wrestle with God and with justice.

Today's antisemitism isn't coming from just one direction. It's coming from both the right and the left.

From the right, we see the familiar hatred: white nationalists, conspiracy theories about Jewish control, violence against synagogues. This antisemitism sees Jews as puppet masters, secretly controlling the world.

From the left, we see a different form: Jews as the ultimate oppressors, Israel as the source of all evil, Zionism as racism. This antisemitism sees Jews as colonialists, inherently privileged, unworthy of solidarity.

Both forms hurt. Both are dangerous. But here's what's important: neither defines who we are. We are not the caricatures that antisemites create. We are a people with a covenant. We are a toolbox for living. We are Jews.

We read in Exodus 19:6: that we are meant to be a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh* -- a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. A chosen People. Not chosen over others, but chosen for others. Chosenness means responsibility. "The biblical notion of chosenness is far less about who the Jewish people are and more about who they are called to be. ... living with covenantal purpose, modeling a distinctive moral life, and serving as an example to all of humanity. ..."⁵

And this chosenness comes with a blessing: 'Ya'er Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka' -- May God's light shine upon you and shine through you. We don't hide our light under a bushel. We let it shine for the world to see.

We don't exist to fight antisemitism. We exist to bring Shabbat into a restless world. To bring tzedakah into an unjust world. To bring Torah into an immoral world. To bring ritual into a

⁵ Wolfowicz

chaotic world. To bring community into a lonely world. These tools are not quaint traditions. They are radical responses to the crises of our age.

“Jewish identity and tradition have a lot to say about the latest crisis of humanity: the challenge of living and transmitting a sense of meaning in a time of vast social and economic upheaval. Taking up the mantle of chosenness now means to be proactive in offering up Jewish ideas and rituals as a toolbox.”⁶

These are exactly the tools that a society in an identity crisis needs. And that's why antisemitism flares up when it does; because deep down, the world knows we have something it needs, and that knowledge creates both longing and resentment.

So what do we do when the alarm sounds? The answer: be more Jewish.

Wear Jewish jewelry and Jewish t-shirts, not as an act of defiance but as an act of identity. Let the world see that Jews are real people, not stereotypes.

Teach your kids that being Jewish is something to celebrate, not hide.

Come to Shabbat services not out of guilt or obligation, but because community gathering is a radical act in an age of isolation. And, a weekly digital detox facilitates uniquely human experiences that AI cannot replicate.

Learn Torah not as ancient history, but as a guide for navigating the complexity of modern life.

Give tzedakah not as charity, but as justice, because the world's brokenness requires our active participation in its repair.

Study Hebrew, celebrate Jewish holidays, argue with Jewish texts, create Jewish art, cook Jewish food, sing Jewish songs, have Jewish friends and Jewish community.

That is how we respond to the alarm. Not by becoming smaller, but by becoming more fully ourselves. By living our chosenness and doubling down.

And here's the remarkable thing: people are responding. Those conversion classes I mentioned? They're not just full of people born into other traditions. They're full of Jews who are coming back to Judaism -- people who grew up Jewish but are now choosing Judaism as adults, with full awareness and intention.

⁶ Wolfowicz

Earlier this year, I brought a conversion candidate before the beit din to complete their conversion. It happened to be right after the murder of Sarah Milgrim and Yaron Lischinsky outside the DC Jewish Museum. At the Beit Din, I asked the question I always ask -- one that years ago was theoretical but had become real over the past few years and was obviously very close to home that day: "Are you sure you want to join the Jewish people, given the history and present tense of anti-Semitism?"

The candidate thought for a moment and said: "I feel even more strongly now. We are a people who stand for justice and compassion. We are a people who question everything and do not settle for easy answers. We are a people that celebrates life. It is my privilege to join the Jewish community and help it continue into the future." Amen!

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yasem lecha shalom -- May God lift up God's face to you and grant you peace. When God lifts us, we lift each other, and find peace.

That's the power of opening the toolbox instead of leaving it on the shelf.

Yes, we've lost some allies. Some progressive organizations won't work with us because we're too complicated, because we won't pass their litmus tests about being the right kind of Jews.

But we've also gained new partnerships:

The day we hosted the event, Turnaway Play about reproductive rights, I was on edge, some of the speakers' social media presence had me worried. Would antisemitism disrupt our sanctuary that night? Would this holy space be violated by suspicion or hate? But then folks showed up. Over 250 people from every corner of Portland came. Jewish and non-Jewish. They listened, they learned, they thanked us for opening our doors. And when I told the story of being told "no" to co-sponsorship, other faith groups reached out to say: "We see you. We stand with you. Antisemitism is never okay." I exhaled for the first time in months. I didn't even realize how much I had been holding my breath until that moment.

And, at the Portland Pride parade, our Jewish group was met with thunderous applause and support, yet, I was still uneasy when Sara wore her "Proud Jew" t-shirt to pick up dinner that evening.

This is hard work and even I have to remind myself that when we double down, when we share our Judaism, instead of backing down, our fear turns into connection.

These experiences taught me something simple and hard: we don't build this alone. We're not giving up on allies; we're reaching for them. We have to risk being known as Jews and say out loud that we need you. Will you stand with us?

The alarm of antisemitism sounded and our response was not to shrink, but to breathe deeper, to open wider, to be more Jewish. And, we're building coalitions not on what we're against, but on what we're for: justice, community, dignity, and hope.

So when the alarm of antisemitism rings, let us not hit snooze. Let us wake up. Let us stand tall. Let us live our Judaism out loud, with pride and with love and with complexity.

Because the future we're building is not a Jewish future despite antisemitism. It's a Jewish future where Jewish wisdom is so obviously needed, Jewish community so clearly valuable, Jewish joy so infectious that the question is not why we're Jewish but how others can learn from what we've discovered. Where our chosenness becomes a blessing.

Y'varechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha -- May God bless you and keep you.

If God keeps us, then our answer is to keep Judaism: keep Shabbat, keep learning, keep showing up, keep celebrating, keep wearing our Magen David without apology.

Ya'er Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka -- May God's light shine upon you and shine through you. If God's face shines on us, our task is to reflect that light where it's visible: on our front doors, at our schools, in our workplaces, in this city. Let our rituals be lanterns others can actually see.

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yasem lecha shalom -- May God lift up God's face to you and grant you peace.

May God lift us when antisemitism tries to bow us down. May we lift our heads and our practices; louder Shabbat, deeper Torah, bolder tzedakah.

Judaism is not about antisemitism. Judaism is about life.

In this moment of vulnerability and truth, let us choose life: keeping, shining, and lifting up our sacred inheritance -- it is the best response we can give to a world that needs exactly what we have to offer.⁷

Kein yehi ratzon. May it be God's will. G'mar chatimah tovah.

⁷ Other texts that influenced this sermon:

As a Jew: Reclaiming Our Story from Those Who Blame, Shame, and Try to Erase Us, Sarah Hurwitz, 2025.

How to Fight Anti-semitism, Bari Weiss, 2021.