

Rabbi Beth Kalisch
Rosh Hashanah 5786
Tuesday, September 23, 2025
The Blessing of America

As a child, my favorite holiday was the Fourth of July. Okay, maybe it was a close tie with Chanukah and Halloween, but those holidays had the benefits of presents and candy. I loved the Fourth of July because the neighborhood where I grew up organized a marvelous children's parade, with a route just a few blocks long, going past my house and ending in our neighborhood playground. All the neighbors came out and waved as we marched past. There were prizes given for decorating our bicycles and tricycles with patriotic colors, or wearing patriotic costumes. One very tall neighbor dressed up every year as Uncle Sam; one girl a few years older than me dressed up every year as the Statue of Liberty. When we arrived at the playground, there were hot dogs, races and games. One year, thanks to what, in my memory at least, was weeks of practicing, a friend and I won second prize in the three-legged race. I kept that red ribbon proudly displayed until I went to college.

My grandfather was an immigrant to this country, arriving as a child together with his parents and sister who fled poverty and persecution under the Russian Empire to come to America, the *goldene medina*, a golden land, a land that promised freedom and opportunity. The trip to America took 3 years, including a period in Eastern Europe where my great-grandfather was imprisoned under false charges, and my great-grandmother, for whom I am named, was sexually assaulted by soldiers while hiding with two young children in a strange land where she didn't speak the language. But in the end, ours is an immigrant success story: they made it to New York, and my grandfather grew up to build his own American dream. My great-grandmother bequeathed to me her Hebrew name: *Bracha*, which means blessing. And this is part of the blessing, part of the *Bracha*, that she also bequeathed to me: I grew up as a safe and proud American, far from the pogroms and authoritarianism that she fled.

When I was a child, patriotism meant decorating my tricycle in red, white and blue streamers. Today, patriotism demands that we have a more difficult conversation, about the grave threats facing our land of blessing.

For decades, the expansion of democracy here in the United States and around the world seemed inevitable, a slow but steady march toward progress. But democracy is under threat around the globe, and we are watching that same phenomenon unfold here. Trust in our democratic institutions and commitment to democratic norms has

been eroding for years now. Efforts to undermine fair elections have been growing for years. The rise in extremism and toxic polarization has led to a dangerous upswing of political violence. And the past 9 months under our current administration have brought sweeping and stunning new attacks on our precious democracy: usurping the authority of Congress and undercutting the legitimacy of the courts; weaponizing federal law enforcement to retaliate against political enemies and using military force as a political tool; demonizing and stripping away the rights of those who are most vulnerable in society, like immigrants and transgender people; attacking freedom of speech and a free press, which we take for granted at our own peril.

We need to talk about these threats to democracy here in synagogue, because democracy is not only an important issue for us as Americans - it is also an important issue for us as a Jewish community. As Amy Spitalnick, the head of the Jewish Council on Public Affairs says, “there is no Jewish safety without inclusive democracy - and there is no inclusive democracy without Jewish safety.”¹

Today, I want to talk to you about why protecting democracy is so critical for us as Jews, and also why it's so important that we bring our full Jewish identity to this conversation. I'll also tell you why I think we should have this conversation on Rosh Hashanah in particular, and what we can do about it together as a community.

“There is no Jewish safety without inclusive democracy.” The lessons from Jewish history make it clear that Jews have always been safest when we are protected by strong democracy that honors the rule of law and enshrines protections for all minorities. America has never been free from antisemitism, and many of our Jewish immigrant families faced more discrimination and pressure to assimilate than we usually wish to remember when we tell our family stories. American democracy has never been perfect. Many of us have overlapping identities and life experiences that have shown us the cracks all too clearly.

Still, even with these imperfections, we have been so blessed as Jews to live in America. We have found levels of acceptance and integration into society unprecedented in most of Jewish history, and we have been able to build a thriving Jewish life at the same time. This success has been made possible because of the strength and pluralism of American democracy that has protected us from persecution, accepted us fully as citizens, and respected our freedom to pray and live as Jews while also being fully American.

¹“Countering Antisemitism & Protecting Democracy - Rabbi Sharon Brous & Amy Spitalnick in conversation.” IKAR Podcasts, September 14, 2025.

For a few decades, it seemed that antisemitism had been permanently banished to the margins of American society. Sadly, that illusion is no longer in place. Just as we are watching the rise of autocracy abroad and at home, so too are we watching antisemitism gain strength. In Charlottesville and in Pittsburgh, we came to understand the frightening growth of white nationalism and white supremacist violence toward Jews. Since October 7th, conspiracy theories about Jewish or "Zionist" power have surged. I don't mean to say that criticism of Israel's government is necessarily antisemitic - for me, it is sometimes an essential expression of my Zionism. Some of what we have witnessed since October 7th, though, is not thoughtful criticism but hateful dehumanization. As Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes, when critics of Israel associate ordinary Jews with the actions of Israel's government, deny Jewish history, deny the humanity of Israelis, or rely on long-standing antisemitic tropes, that criticism crosses a line into antisemitic behavior.²

Talking about antisemitism often means navigating these kinds of nuanced conversations about what antisemitism is and is not. But understanding the rise of antisemitism in our country also requires understanding how these dynamics function in the parts of the internet and our society where conspiracy theories, not nuanced conversations, flourish.

For example, in the days since the right wing activist Charlie Kirk was murdered, and even after his killer was apprehended, conspiracy theories have proliferated on the internet. Many of these conspiracy theories, on both the far-right and the far-left, are antisemitic. The Anti-Defamation League's Center for Extremism tracked social media postings³ and found that as of September 16, six days after Kirk's murder, there were approximately 72,000 posts on X, formerly Twitter, that contained the phrase "Israel killed Charlie Kirk," referring to a number of conspiracy theories in which Israel's government was responsible for Kirk's assassination. One far-right post making this accusation had 10 million views and 200,000 likes. One far-left post had 10 million views and 100,000 likes.

These extremist voices have real world consequences, including a frightening rise in antisemitic hate crimes. In April, an arsonist set fire to the Pennsylvania governor's mansion, hours after Governor Shapiro and his family had finished their Passover seder. In May, a young couple about to be engaged - Yaron Lischensky, an

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<https://truah.org/resources/criticism-of-israel-and-antisemitism-how-to-tell-where-one-ends-and-the-other-begins/>

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<https://www.adl.org/resources/article/antisemitic-and-anti-israel-conspiracy-theories-follow-fatal-shooting-charlie>

Israeli-German citizen and Sarah Milgrim, an American Reform Jew, were murdered leaving an American Jewish Committee event at the Capitol Jewish museum. In June, a small peaceful protest in Denver support of the Israeli hostages was firebombed, leaving an 82-year old woman dead, and 7 people injured, including an 88-year-old Holocaust survivor.

In the face of our loneliness and this rising antisemitism, some voices have stepped forward as our allies - offering us support which they claim must come at the cost of some aspects of our inclusive democracy. It is true that some college campuses have been flash points for antisemitism, and last year on Yom Kippur, I spoke about what some of our Beth David students had been experiencing. But while the crackdown on universities is being carried out in the name of fighting antisemitism, most of these restrictions and funding cuts do nothing to protect Jewish students. Universities have been an important path to the blessings that we have enjoyed in this country as Jews. They are part of a strong and healthy democracy because they help to develop and nurture independent critical thought. Stifling universities and limiting their independence has been a strategy of many authoritarian leaders around the globe as they seek to silence opposition. A Jewish federal judge, earlier this month, after acknowledging the very real scourge of anti-semitism on campus, concluded that the evidence [quote] “makes it difficult to conclude anything other than that [the administration] used antisemitism as a smokescreen for a targeted, ideologically-motivated assault on this country’s premier universities.”⁴

It is hard to take the administration’s commitment to fighting antisemitism seriously when they have dismantled the Office for Civil Rights, the agency with the mandate for investigating instances of antisemitism in public schools as well as universities, and when they appoint people with blatantly antisemitic views to positions of power.

Friends, we are being played.

We cannot allow antisemitism to be weaponized in a way that damages the very democratic institutions and norms that keep us safe as Jews. And we cannot allow this damage to be done in our name, in a way that sows division between the Jewish community and other groups who are fighting to preserve democracy.

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https://www.harvard.edu/federal-lawsuits/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2025/09/gov.uscourts.mad_283718.238.0_1.pdf, p. 79.

There is no Jewish safety without inclusive democracy. But the reverse is also true: there is no inclusive democracy without Jewish safety.

We need to have this conversation about democracy as Jews - and we can't be afraid to talk about antisemitism as part of this conversation. Fighting antisemitism is not a distraction from the urgent work of protecting democracy - it is a key component of that work. For some of us, talking about antisemitism can be uncomfortable - we know that many groups are even more vulnerable than us, even with the recent rise of antisemitism, and we would rather talk about protecting those groups rather than ourselves. And especially since October 7th, progressive spaces have felt to many of us like uncomfortable places to be Jewish or to talk about being Jewish, especially for those of us for whom our connection to Israel is a critical piece of our Jewish identity. It has been easier to avoid these spaces, or to show up to them simply as Americans, without focusing on our Jewish identity.

But this, too, is a false choice. We cannot wish antisemitism away, and we should not treat it as a narrow issue, separate from conversations about other forms of hate and attacks on democracy. Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the former U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, calls antisemitism the “canary in the coal mine of democracy.” There is no way to fight extremism without fighting antisemitism, and we need to help educate those who want to protect democracy but don't understand antisemitism or take it seriously enough.

It's not a simple conversation, because antisemitism functions differently than many other forms of prejudice, and because part of the impact of antisemitic conspiracy theories is to divide Jews from other groups. As journalist Yair Rosenberg writes, “unlike many other bigotries, anti-Semitism is not merely a social prejudice; it is a conspiracy theory about how the world operates.”⁵ Civil rights leader Eric Ward often explains that antisemitism is a tool used by extremists to “bring distrust” to democracy and “deconstruct democratic practices.”⁶ As Jews, we cannot afford to wait for others to have these tough conversations for us, or to let ourselves be marginalized in coalitions fighting for values that are also important to us. We can - and must - learn to build coalitions with people we don't always see eye-to-eye with, in order to act together to protect democracy.

There is no Jewish safety without inclusive democracy, and there is no inclusive democracy without Jewish safety.

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/texas-synagogue-anti-semitism-conspiracy-theory/621286/>

⁶ <https://jewishpublicaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Antisemitism-X-Democracy-Report.pdf>

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I want to pause here and acknowledge that in one sense, Rosh Hashanah might seem like a funny time for a sermon on democracy. I believe that democracy is a Jewish value, but if you've been paying attention to our liturgy today, you may have noticed that one of the dominant images in many of the Rosh Hashanah prayers is the image of God as king, or, as the gender-neutral language of our prayerbook helps us to imagine, sovereign ruler.

Earlier in this service, as the Cantor and I stood before the open ark and announced the new year, I read a prayer which declares, "Majestic God, today you are enthroned." All of the grandeur of this service - the majestic music, the blasting of a kind of trumpet - it is a kind of coronation ceremony for God.

My guess is that for most of us at Beth David, this is not our favorite aspect of Rosh Hashanah, nor our favorite metaphor for God. But some of that resistance misunderstands what our prayerbook is really trying to say.

The Hebrew Bible conveys profound ambivalence about the very idea of a human king. Pharaoh, a king who also believes he is God, is the embodiment of evil in our Torah. Many generations later, the Book of Samuel tells the story of how the Israelites approach Samuel and clamour for a king. You've already heard about Samuel this morning - in our Haftarah reading this morning, he was the baby born to Hannah at the end of the story. Samuel, who by now is very old, warns the people of the ways in which a human king will inevitably abuse power. Only God, the Bible teaches, can be fully trusted to rule in justice and compassion.

Later Jewish tradition emphasizes the contrasts between God and a human king. As Rabbi Elie Kaunfer points out,⁷ if you hate the idea of kings, you are in good company with the rabbis! Over and over, our sages describe God as exactly the opposite of a flesh and blood king. Human kings, the rabbis point out, cloister themselves among only a small group of loyal advisors, and have no time or interest in listening to ordinary people. God as Sovereign, on the other hand, listens to each and every one of us when we pray. Human kings, they point out, consider it a degradation to interact with a person who is poor or whose appearance is disfigured. But God as Sovereign loves and accepts all of us equally, and acts as the protector of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow - those who are most vulnerable.

⁷ Elie Kaunfer, "Crowning the "Un-king" King." *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*, Ed. Lawrence Hoffman, Jewish Lights, 2014. 192-196.

The point of this subversive metaphor, as Rabbi Kaunfer calls it, is not to glorify human kings - it is to diminish them. On Rosh Hashanah, when we enthrone God - and only God - as the true Sovereign, we are pledging that our deepest loyalty is not to any human ruler, no matter how powerful and threatening they may be - but to the God of justice and compassion, the God who watches out for those who are vulnerable.

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So what do we do about it? How do we stand up against autocracy and defend our precious democracy?

First, I hope you'll begin your own conversations about democracy, Jewish values, and antisemitism. Too often, we only talk about these issues with people with whom we know we agree. But we cannot move our society forward until we start having these conversations across lines of difference - and that can start in very small ways, with simple conversations between neighbors or relatives. So, this is my challenge to you over the next ten days. Before Yom Kippur ends - can you think of one person you want to talk to about these issues?

Second, I hope you'll join me in standing up to support our neighbors who are already being targeted by anti-democratic measures. We need to support them, and we should be doing it proudly as Jews, because our strength is in our solidarity. As part of the RAC-PA, the statewide Reform Jewish social justice network that Beth David is helping to build, we are participating in an effort to strengthen protections for immigrant families in our schools. When you came in today, you received a handout with a QR code to [contact your own school district](https://urj.tfaforms.net/f/hhdschools) (<https://urj.tfaforms.net/f/hhdschools>). Please do. If you want to learn more about this effort and many other ways of helping immigrants, I hope you'll join us on October 11, for a special Shabbat brunch in our sukkah hearing from several Beth David members who volunteer in this area. The transgender community is another group that needs our support as Jews. This summer, I was proud to co-author [an op-ed in the Harrisburg Patriot-News](https://www.pennlive.com/opinion/2025/06/as-rabbis-our-faith-teaches-us-to-honor-transgender-people-opinion.html) condemning the attacks against transgender people. If you missed it when we sent it out to the congregation, you can pick up a copy in the lobby on your way out. Later this year, we will also have a training on how to help support transgender people. (<https://www.pennlive.com/opinion/2025/06/as-rabbis-our-faith-teaches-us-to-honor-transgender-people-opinion.html>)

Third, we need to think longer-term and start strengthening the relationships with our neighbors that will help us act more powerfully together to support democracy. Starting

next month, Beth David is partnering with two other synagogues, Main Line Reform Temple and Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, on a new project to strengthen our collective voice in Montgomery County. The first step is a series of meetings in October for our members to talk to each other about the issues that are most weighing on our hearts about our community and our country. These meetings will be the foundation of a longer-term campaign - something we can work on for a year or more to be able to have a deeper impact. Many of you are already signed up to attend one of our house meetings. But if you're not, I hope you'll consider [signing up](#). Even if you can't make it to a house meeting, please join us on Sunday morning, November 2, for a report-back where we share what we heard from each other, and begin to think about choosing our campaign. You can use the separate QR code found in the RAC-PA blurb in your program (<https://forms.gle/iz3vVpvJgERG382u7>).

I pray that this new year we are entering, 5786, will be a year of *bracha*, of blessing, for our Jewish community and for the United States of America. May we never take for granted what a blessing it is to live here. May we rise to the responsibility of preserving this blessing, that we might bequeath it to our next generation, too.