A Response to Antisemitism Today
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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It happened last year on the Monday morning of Sukkot. I remembered that it was a Monday because it happened when I was bringing the garbage bin in. As I was dragging the pale back, I noticed something odd on the sidewalk. Something peculiar in how the light played with the sprinkler water and the cement. It looked like there was writing on the curb. So, I paused and looked down and I noticed something that looked like a "J." I took a step back and my jaw dropped. I found myself standing over a carved message that read, "JEW." The first thought I had was for the safety and security of my family. My house had been targeted for a hate crime. I reported it and am now one of the 2024 statistics that shows the exponential increase of hate towards Jews in this country. I must admit, if I'm being completely honest with you, my second thought was, "If this was two weeks prior it would have been a good introduction to a High Holy Day Sermon." The third thought was, why me? I'm surrounded by Jews, most of whom are Orthodox. And that's when I looked up at my house and realized, "Oh, I'm the one with a 'Bring them home now' sign."

Today we stand at the threshold of a new year, and we can't help but to reflect deeply on this past year and who we are as Jews living in America today. The headlines remind us daily of rising antisemitism, political polarization, violence abroad and at home, and questions of belonging that strike at the very heart of what it means to be Jewish in America. And so, the question for us today is this: how do we live in this moment with courage, clarity, and hope? How do we raise children who are both proud to be Jews and equipped to stand firm in a society that sometimes feels hostile to our existence? How do we ensure that our tradition strengthens us rather than isolates us, and that our presence here is not only about surviving, but about flourishing?

This year has shaken us—not only through political currents or global crises—but through real, visceral attacks aimed directly at our people.

On the first night of Passover, as many of us sat around our seder tables retelling our story of liberation, Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro and his family were targeted by an antisemitic attack. It was chilling—a direct attempt to intimidate a Jewish public servant during our sacred holiday. It sent a message: that even here, in America, even today, Jews are not safe.

And only weeks later, on May 21, that message echoed again in Washington, D.C., when two young Israeli embassy staffers—Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Milgrim—were shot and killed outside the Capital Jewish Museum as they left a reception for young Jewish professionals. The assailant was chanting "Free, free Palestine!" as he was taken into custody. It turned a place of memory and celebration into a site of grief and terror.

Then came June 1. In Boulder, Colorado, a man disguised as a gardener hurled Molotov cocktails into a peaceful pro-Israel demonstration, killing an 82-year-old woman, Karen Diamond, and injuring twelve people, one of whom was a Holocaust survivor, Barbara

Steinmetz. It was not a spontaneous outburst, but a carefully premeditated act of hate, designed to instill fear not only in those present, but in all Jews watching. While in custody, the attacker exhibited no remorse, saying that he hates "the Zionist group", that he wanted to kill all "Zionist people", and that if given the opportunity he would do it again.

Three incidents. Three very different contexts. One sobering message: antisemitism is not a relic, not a specter confined to textbooks or Holocaust museums. It is alive, aggressive, and bold enough to interrupt our holidays, infiltrate our civic institutions, and ignite violence in our streets. And yes, there are so many more incidents to choose from. I'm sure each one of us could name another events where Jews were singled out for being Jews and treated inappropriately because of our Jewishness.

We would be naive to ignore the fear these attacks provoke. Fear is real. But fear alone cannot guide our response. Our history teaches us this. Safety has never come from aligning with power for its own sake. Safety has never come from silencing dissent or weakening the freedoms that make life possible for us here. Rather, our safety as Jews has always been tied to something deeper: to the flourishing of civil society, to the strength of democracy, to the protection of human dignity for all.

When those foundations are strong, we thrive. When they are weakened—when free speech is curtailed, when protest is criminalized, when immigrants are scapegoated, when the vulnerable are left unprotected—then we are all at risk. To trade away the freedoms of others in the hope of securing ourselves is not only shortsighted; it undermines the very ground beneath our feet.

In the face of fear, our tradition calls us back to the stories of our heritage. The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Akiva, who, during the Roman persecution, continued to teach Torah publicly even though it was forbidden. When questioned, he replied with a parable: A fox invited the fish to leave the water to escape the dangers of the net. But the fish answered, "If we are afraid in the water, which is our life, how much more so on dry land, where we cannot live?" So too, Akiva said, "If we are afraid while clinging to Torah, our life-source, how much more so if we abandon it?" (Berakhot 61b).

Akiva's courage was not reckless bravado. It was clarity: our strength does not come from abandoning who we are, or hiding our Judaism in public, our strength comes from deepening it. Torah, tradition, values—these are our waters. To forsake them in pursuit of safety is to guarantee our own drowning. To hold fast to them, even in fear, is to claim life.

And this is where the symbolic weight of these attacks comes into focus. They were designed to frighten us away from public Jewish life—from serving in government, from gathering in museums, from marching in the streets. They were meant to make us second-guess whether it is worth showing up as Jews in America. But like Rabbi Akiva's fish, we know that abandoning our waters is not an option. To survive is to remain in Torah, to remain in community, to remain in courageous visibility.

A few years ago, Commercial Avenue was renamed for Rutgers' own Paul Robeson. I knew of him mostly through his recording of *Ol' Man River.* When they renamed the street I went down a

Robeson music rabbit hole, but the piece that really got me was his recording of *The House I Live In*. In this piece he asks, "What is America to me? A name, a map, the flag I see, a certain word, "democracy" what is America to me?" He answers the with the following,

The people that I meet…the faces that I see, all races all religions... the right to speak my mind out… but especially the people—that's America to me.

It's quaint, almost naively hopeful—democracy, neighborliness, freedom. But as the weight of this year pressed on me, I felt compelled to ask: What is America to me? What is America to me as a Jew and as a Rabbi?

I come from a family of immigrants, but also a family that has been in this land since we were colonies of England. For the longest time we believed the family lore that two of our ancestors, Robert Treat Paine and Thomas McKean, were the same Robert Treat Paine and Thomas McKean that signed the Declaration of Independence. Then we had the gall to hire a genealogist to verify that truth and oops not the same Robert Treat Paine and Thomas McKean. Similar birth dates, similar death dates, similar states of residence, but completely different people. However, he did verify our relatives who fought for the North in the Civil War and fought in the Battles of Ticonderoga and Lexington and Concord so that's something. The big lesson is if you want to believe the family history maybe you shouldn't hire a genealogist.

I've always grown up believing that America was my home and that there wasn't a corner of this country that wasn't my home. That had been my viewpoint up until the aftermath of October 7th here in America. And now we see Jews being threatened time and again just for being Jews and Israel being used as the foil to allow anti-Semitism to fester. We are seeing a breakdown of peace and a breakdown of society.

The prophet Jeremiah taught exiles in Babylon to: *"Seek the peace of the city to which I have exiled you, for in its peace you shall find your peace."* Our tradition invites us to invest in our homes—even when they falter.

Robeson lived through a period of great change and turmoil. Of fighting for civil rights and fighting against injustices, but his song remained hopeful and quaint. I think my song would include voices of children on the playground and lights of the city, but it might also include the echoes of Jews in Boulder running from firebombs. Of Latinos worried about being targeted by ICE. Of National Guards marching in the streets. Of an incredibly divisive country where we think our brethren are our enemies when they aren't. It would include all of it. The beauty and the brokenness. The harmony and the hatred. Because the house we live in is not yet finished.

That is the essential Jewish lesson: America, like Israel, like every society, is always unfinished. It is the house we build, brick by brick, through justice and compassion, through vigilance and courage. It is the house where God's presence dwells only if we keep the foundation strong.

This leaves us with a question—not Robeson's, not mine, but ours: What is America to us? And what will we make of this house we live in and where do we begin?

To be Jews in America today is to live in the tension between fear and faith, between survival and flourishing. It is to remember that the Torah commands us more than any other mitzvah to love the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. That memory of vulnerability is not meant to close us off, but to open us up—to think about who is vulnerable and protect them. And this year, I think all Americans are vulnerable.

The attacks in Washington, in Boulder, against Governor Shapiro's family, remind us that antisemitism is a threat not only to Jews, but to the very fabric of the society we live in. Every assault on Jewish safety is also an assault on democracy, on civil society, on the values that protect all vulnerable people. Which means our response cannot be only about defending ourselves. It must also be about strengthening the freedoms and rights that safeguard everyone.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of choice. Do we allow these attacks to drive us into fear and isolation? Or do we respond with courage, like Rabbi Akiva, knowing that our life is in Torah, in justice, in the waters of community and hope?

To be Jews in America today is to insist that we can both fight antisemitism and stand with others who are vulnerable. It is to believe that our safety lies not in retreat, but in solidarity. It is to hold fast to the truth that while we cannot stop every act of hate, we can refuse to let hate define us.

The shofar we hear on Rosh Hashanah is not a lullaby. It is a cry that pierces the soul. It tells us: wake up. The world is broken, and you are called to help mend it. The shofar does not ask us to wait for perfect conditions; it demands that we step forward in imperfect ones. It demands that we remain visible as Jews, resilient as a community, and faithful as a people who know that God's presence abides wherever justice and dignity are defended.

On this Rosh Hashanah, may we resolve to live as Jews who refuse to abandon our waters, who cling to Torah and tradition not as relics, but as our source of life. May we raise children who are not only unafraid of their identity, but proud of it—who know that to be Jewish is to stand for hope, for justice, for dignity.

May we resist the temptation to let fear be weaponized against us. May we respond to every attack not with retreat, but with courage. And may we live, this year and every year, as a people of memory and a people of hope, a people proud of our heritage and who we are.

Amen