

Yom Kippur Sermon 5787ⁱ

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Gud Yuntif^l.

Yom Kippur is a day that demands the truth about the moment we are living in and forces the question: What will ‘the truth’ require of us, the Jewish people?

The pursuit of truth has never been an easy task. Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, an 18th-century Hasidic master, taught that the radical search for truth is a holy task precisely because human nature makes it easy for us to look away, especially when it makes us uncomfortable. Here is one of his teachings:

“Midrash² tells about the hour when God prepared to create humankind. The angels formed two factions, one group advocating for the creation of human beings and one group against it. The Angel of Love said: ‘Let humankind be created, because they will do great things in the name of love.’ But the Angel of Truth said: ‘Let humankind not be created, for they will practice deception.’ The Angel of Justice said: ‘Let humankind be created, for they will pursue justice.’ But the Angel of Peace said: ‘Let humankind not be created, for they will be at war.’ What did God do? He hurled Truth to the earth in order to create humankind.

After Truth had fallen, Peace pined for it, for it understood that without Truth other virtues were empty shells: compassion without truth is mere platitude, humility without truth is camouflage, and justice without truth becomes a dangerous farce. The Kotzker Rebbe teaches

¹ My thanks to my wife, Marita Anderson, for being my writing partner for this sermon.

² *Genesis Rabbah*, *B'reishit* 8:5

that humankind needs Truth, or everything else will crumble, and it is up to us, says the Rebbe, to dig up Truth from the earth.

Here is a truth: The essence of the Jewish people, who we are at our core, is a people who reject the claims of godlike authority over us—whether idols, tyrants, or even ideas. Our sacred stories are replete with examples of not bending the knee. The High Holiday liturgy reminds us that we name only God as Aveinu Malkeinu/ Our Parent, Our King.

Even if you do not believe in God, we Jews have always been a counterculture minority that rejects human claims to absolute power. Our monotheism is more than religious; it is also political. Jewish challenge to tyrannical power is often met with slander, threats, intimidation, and, eventually, violence. That is how you know it is tyrannical.

There is an idea emerging from Jewish ‘thought leaders’, best articulated by Dara Horn, that antisemitism has been misunderstood. It is not mere bigotry; rather, it is The Big Lie that people use to gain or keep power. The Big Lie professes to be self-righteous in opposition to the Jew as the imagined enemy. Facts have no bearing on the truth.³

For the Groyper, a Right-Wing movement of Nick Fuentes that promotes America as a White-Christian country, it’s useful to portray the Jew as an alien, disloyal force.

For the Democratic Socialists of America, it’s useful to exploit the Jew as a corrupt capitalist.

For the isolationist America First movement, Jews are elite ‘globalists’;

³ Dara Horn, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2026).

and for the Liberal Universalist who lionizes being a ‘citizen of the world’, the Jew is painted as reprehensibly patriotic.

This manipulation is Orwellian and would be laughable if it were not so effective in gathering the masses and forming coalitions even by groups that otherwise despise one another.

Rallying against the Jews for any reason, fabricated or otherwise, is valuable. We are visible enough to be seen, different enough to be made ‘other’, but small enough that we do not *seem* to have the power to do much about it.

Professor Ruth Weiss calls this The Politics of the Pointing Finger. Like the magician pointing his finger to deflect your attention, antisemitism is used to distract from the very real issues facing society.⁴

Naming antisemitism as The Big Lie forces us to recognize it for what it is; and allows us to wield the truth in confronting those who exploit us for their own interests. Instead of trying to prove that we are good and helpful citizens, we need to reclaim our agency. If we can recognize this pattern, we can inoculate ourselves, and others, against it.

Friends, there is nothing organic about what we Jews are experiencing today; rather, there are organized movements against us that are well funded and deliberate.

Front and center is Qatar, a tiny Middle Eastern country with tremendous wealth and ‘soft power’.⁵ It is a 21st century absolute monarchy, with only 330,000 citizens and a population of 3 million foreign workers who are one step above ‘slaves’. Qatar rejects Western norms and contradicts human rights in every possible way, including

⁴ Haviv Rettig Gur, “Why Antisemitism Works, with Prof. Ruth Wisse,” *Ask Haviv Anything*, podcast, August 12, 2026.

⁵ Haviv Rettig Gur, “137: What Does Qatar Want?,” *Ask Haviv Anything*, podcast, August 5, 2026.

women's rights, religious freedom, criminalizing homosexuality, and severe limits on the freedom of the press.

Qatar is the grand patron of Hamas and their Muslim Brotherhood ideology. Its state-funded, global media network, Al-Jazeera, has been devastating to Israel, to the Palestinians, and to Jews in America. By taking Hamas out of isolation, Al-Jazeera turned them into a world phenomenon.

The truth is that in the last 20 years, Qatar has been the single most significant foreign contributor to US higher education, pouring billions of dollars into our universities. Much of this money has been spent on satellite campuses of American universities in Doha. But the influence of such financial investments cannot be understated. No university president can afford to reject this type of money.

To be clear: an authoritarian monarchy with extreme Islamic ideology has spent years cultivating relationships with the very institutions that educate future journalists, policymakers, diplomats, and academics. Is it surprising that universities were saturated with Hamas propaganda even before the dust of October 7th had time to settle? Could this be why so many American students were dressing up like Jihadi militants shouting "Globalize the Intifada?"

The harassment of Jewish students and professors has nothing to do with social justice; it's part of an eliminationist strategy to force Jews out of academic spaces and positions of leadership. Like all tyrannical movements, there is not even a pretense for conversation or debate. For its goal is not compromise, but solely to galvanize.

It has taken a long time to figure all of this out, but now The Big Lie has been exposed, and there are people among us who are starting to push back. Our very own Georgia State Representative, Democrat Esther

Panitch, managed to pass a bill making Georgia the first state to require public schools to disclose foreign funding. This includes money not only from Qatar, but also from China, Russia, and Iran. And here is the good news: because Georgia took this first step, other states are now starting to follow suit. In my conversations with Representative Panitch, she was adamant that our best defense is through legal action; without it, as history has shown, we are really vulnerable.

Stopping Qatar from amplifying Hamas ideology in the United States is only part of the story. There is another dimension of The Big Lie that demands reckoning. We need to address the growing influence of the Democratic Socialists of America, known as the DSA. I am speaking to you on Yom Kippur about a political movement with humility and discomfort, as I have never believed that the role of the rabbi is to tell you how to vote. What convinced me to speak about the DSA, however, is not its domestic agenda, nor its foreign policy, despite how deeply I disagree with both. I am speaking about it because of its posture toward Israel as the sole bearer of all that is wrong with the world, and because of its hostile position toward Jews living in America. The DSA is not simply another political organization, but rather a movement that is gaining power by fanning the flames of antisemitic rhetoric.

I have to admit that the DSA has captured something important about the changing political climate in our country. In an age of robocalls and big money fundraising, voters appreciate personal connection and the DSA delivers it. With a very friendly, youthful front, and 220 chapters around the country, it uses a grassroots strategy to recruit local progressive candidates.

But when you look under the surface of what seems like a progressive platform, you will find a party resolution⁶ demanding that its members support and abide by strict anti-Zionist requirements. This resolution actually prohibits membership in the DSA if someone is also a member of Jewish organizations, including the left-leaning J Street, the Democratic Majority for Israel, AIPAC, and others. And it prohibits its members from equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism under all circumstances. Any candidate who wants the DSA endorsement has to explicitly adopt an anti-Zionist position.

As an American Jew who celebrates Israel's sovereignty and self-determination, when I see the words "DSA-endorsed," I read them as a direct contradiction to the interest, the safety, and the well-being of the Jewish people.

Of course, the most visible DSA politician is New York City's mayor Zohran Mamdani. I'm speaking about him not because we have a vote in NY City, but because his influence and methods are being replicated by others running for political office.

Mamdani's view on Israel does not make him special- it is standard DSA. What most concerns me is Mamdani's effort to sideline the Jewish community.

Just eight weeks ago, a young Jewish lawyer in New York wrote the following letter⁷:

"When I was a lawyer at Gibson Dunn in D.C., we took our summer associates to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. A survivor spoke to us and said something that stuck with me:

⁶ Anti-Defamation League, "Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)," ADL, accessed September 18, 2026, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgroundunder/democratic-socialists-america-dsa>

⁷ Eli Albrecht, "When I was a lawyer at Gibson Dunn in D.C.," LinkedIn post, September 2026, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/eealbrecht_when-i-was-a-lawyer-at-gibson-dunn-in-dc-activity-7488350309174419456-gTJh

Lawyers need to know the holocaust did not begin with camps. It began when Jews were removed from institutions - above all, legal institutions. Judges stripped of their robes. Lawyers disbarred. Then, when law groups were Judenrein, they codified laws that made discrimination systematic and "legal."

First, you remove the Jews from the institutions. Then, Jews can be discriminated against without representation.

(In July), Mayor Mamdani announced his 18-member Advisory Committee on the Judiciary. The Committee was promised to be "truly reflective of New York City."

Not one of the 18 is Jewish.

Not one Jewish lawyer, former judge, or law professor - in a city where one in eight residents is Jewish and even Justice John Leventhal, recommended by the State's Chief Judge, was rejected.

It is estimated that over 50% of the New York bar is Jewish. That means there is a 0.0004% chance of no Jews being selected to the Committee.

Mamdani's marginalization of Jews has been ongoing, and few voices on the Left have spoken up.

On Day 1, Mamdani revoked the IHRA antisemitism definition (top priority); he changed the NYPD guidance protecting houses of worship, eliminated Jews from the City's immigrant-heritage map, called for the arrest of the prime minister of the only Jewish state, and now created a Judenrein Judiciary Committee...

In NYC, there is a concerted effort to disappear Jews from public life and leadership..." (his letter goes on..)

but friends, don't think that Mamdani is irrelevant in Georgia, because this coming November, there are 2 local, DSA candidates running for the Georgia State House, while others are campaigning for higher office around the country.

As I struggle to find a way for us to respond, I am encouraged by how the Jewish leadership of Michigan is confronting their DSA-adjacent candidate for US Senate, Abdul El Sayed. I believe that their response can be directed to candidates across the political spectrum, on both sides of the aisle.

Rabbis throughout Michigan have signed a letter called: Nonnegotiable⁸. In it, they are clear.

"...American Jews now feel forced to fight for the party they have long considered their political home, asking its leaders to treat the explosive bigotry and violence directed at our community as the national emergency it is—not with platitudes, but with urgency and moral clarity... We no longer have the luxury of pretending our coalition can hold while our identities are under attack and our own safety is treated as negotiable."

The Michigan Jewish leadership is transparent about their 5 conditions for anyone seeking their support and votes:

First: "Jewish safety — including for Zionist Jews — in Michigan and across America- is nonnegotiable;

Second: "Our right to define our own Jewish identities - is nonnegotiable";

⁸ "Nonnegotiable Petition," *New York Times*, September 8, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/09/08/us/politics/nonnegotiable-petition.htm>

Third: “Our support for Jewish sovereignty in Israel - is nonnegotiable”;

Fourth: “Welcoming our full participation in American political life - is nonnegotiable”;

And finally: “A vision that builds a future for both the Palestinians and Israelis, not just dismantles Israel - is nonnegotiable”

This document, stated clearly and with widespread Jewish support, is a powerful way of saying to politicians: *don't take us for granted*.

What will ‘the truth’ on this Yom Kippur require of us, the Jewish people?

That we will not be used for someone else’s political gain.
We refuse to contort ourselves in order to be acceptable,
and we refuse to vote against our own self-interest.

We are neither your puppet masters nor your victims; we are an ancient, resilient people.

Gud Yuntif

ⁱ Since delivering this sermon, two corrections have been made. The first is that the citizen population of Qatar is estimated to be 330,000 (not 300,000). The second is that Michigan Senate Candidate, Abdul El-Sayed is not officially a DSA candidate. I think that it is fair to say that he is DSA “adjacent” (which is the term that I have added to this redacted version of the Yom Kippur sermon). He has spoken many times at DSA events, including their 2019 fundraiser where he served as the keynote speaker. He is enthusiastically endorsed by many DSA luminaries (Bernie Sanders, Rashida Tlaib, Summer Lee, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez), and socialist organizers call him “a longtime friend of Detroit DSA.”