

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 2025

“Israel: A Phoenix of Creation”

On this Rosh Hashanah, we gather as a sacred community. The shofar sounds to mark the start of a new year—and to remind us that a new beginning is always within reach: for us, for our people, for the world itself. Each year calls us to marvel at creation, to give thanks for what has come into being, and to commit ourselves once more to nurturing life in all its fullness.

This morning, I want to take us on a journey—not only inward, but outward. A journey that begins in 1948 and carries us forward into the present day, a journey that celebrates what our people—often against all odds—have given to the world.

In the seventy-seven years since the birth of the State of Israel, creation has unfolded in the life of the Jewish people with astonishing force. Out of the ashes of the Holocaust, from centuries of exile and persecution, from soil that seemed barren both physically and spiritually, a people reclaimed its ancient tongue, rebuilt its cities, and gathered the scattered sparks of Jewish life into a flame, that illuminates the world. The prophet Isaiah declared, “The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus” (Isaiah 35:1). Israel’s independence made that vision real: a land poor in resources and fragile in survival became a center of renewal through the persistence of Jewish ingenuity. To endure as a Jewish state is not merely a political reality but a spiritual necessity—the vessel through which Jewish memory, language, and imagination continue to breathe. Every people has the right to bring its gifts to humanity; Israel is the wellspring of the Jewish contribution. Without it, the voice of our covenant might have faded. With it, the world is blessed with medicines that heal, technologies that connect, and art and music that stir the soul—living proof of God’s promise to Abraham, “Through you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

We are gathered here at Temple Beth El in humility, in awe, in prayer. Yet today I ask you also to gather in pride. Because to be Jewish, to be part of a people who have produced extraordinary contributions in medicine, science, technology, the arts, and the defense of freedom, is to know that even in a fragile, broken world, the Jewish spirit burns with a light that cannot be dimmed.

When David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence on May 14, 1948, the fledgling nation had fewer than 900,000 Jews, besieged on every side, scarce in resources, and rich only in spirit. Early pioneers drained swamps, made the Negev bloom, built hospitals and universities. From the ashes of the Shoah, from centuries of exile, a people who had been told they were impossible, unwanted, extinguished, chose to create a nation committed to survival through innovation. And not only for itself. From its earliest days, Israel sent doctors and relief teams wherever disaster struck. Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus, became a beacon of healing for Jews and Arabs alike. In the years since, Israeli hospitals have quietly cared for Syrians wounded in civil war, flown entire neonatal units to earthquake-stricken countries, and dispatched doctors to be among the first on the ground when disaster hits—whether it is a hurricane in Puerto Rico, an earthquake in Mexico, or a tsunami in Asia. Israeli field hospitals are recognized by the World Health Organization as among the very best in the world. This is tikkun olam made real. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference.” Israel, and the Jewish people more broadly, have refused to be indifferent.

Israel's story is also written in the soil and in the words we speak. From the invention of drip irrigation to the greening of deserts and the planting of millions of trees, Israel has taught the world how to make barren land blossom. Archaeologists in Jerusalem, Masada, and Qumran have unearthed treasures like the Dead Sea Scrolls, restoring to humanity the

voices of our ancestors. And perhaps most wondrous of all, Israel revived Hebrew — the language of our prophets — once silent in prayer books, now alive on the lips of children in playgrounds and poets in cafes. These gifts remind us that Israel's renewal was not only political, but agricultural, historical, and spiritual — a living bridge between our ancient covenant and the modern world.

Israel has also transformed medicine itself. Its researchers have given the world breakthrough treatments for cancer, neurological illness, and chronic disease. They have pioneered stem cell therapies at the frontiers of regenerative medicine and developed lifesaving emergency bandages now standard for paramedics everywhere. From tiny cameras that see inside the body, to innovative drugs that extend life, Israel has changed the practice of healing. When we say “Israel heals,” it is not a metaphor—it is a fact.

The same spirit that heals the body has also reshaped how we live and connect with one another. Israeli engineers laid the groundwork for the mobile phone, WiFi in laptops, and the Core processors that power our computers. They revolutionized data storage with the USB flash drive, secured the internet with the firewall, and redefined navigation with Waze.

In a land where water is scarce, Israel invented ways to recycle, desalinate, and even pull drinking water from the very air. Imagine: a nation that knows drought so intimately finding a way to create water out of thin air. Today, those devices quench thirst in disaster zones, refugee camps, and even American cities. And when cars brake automatically to prevent accidents, it is Israeli vision-based technology saving lives on highways across the globe.

Robotics, too, has flourished. From surgical systems that let doctors operate with minimal invasiveness and astonishing precision, to exoskeletons that enable paraplegics to stand and walk, these innovations are tools that restore not only life, but dignity. When one

veteran stood at Yankee Stadium wearing such a device and crossed the field, it was not just his triumph—it was a living embodiment of the Jewish value that life and dignity must be restored wherever possible.

Israel's military contributions cannot be separated from this story. Born of necessity, Israel became a living laboratory of defense innovation creating The Iron Dome missile defense system which intercepts rockets with extraordinary accuracy, protecting millions of civilians and earning admiration worldwide. Elbit Systems pioneered drone technology that serves not only defense, but also humanitarian search-and-rescue missions. Israeli intelligence innovations in counterterrorism and cyber defense have been shared with allies, preventing attacks and safeguarding critical infrastructure across the globe.

If medicine and technology heal the body, then Israel's artists have healed the spirit. From its first days, Israel has offered the world not only survival, but the gift of the arts — music and story, color and movement, expressions of the soul that remind us what it means to be fully alive.

Itzhak Perlman, who overcame polio as a child in Tel Aviv, lifted his violin like a prayer and made the world hear the Jewish soul in every note. Amos Oz gave voice to the complexity of Israeli life through stories and essays that touched readers everywhere. Marc Chagall left his luminous stained-glass windows at Hadassah Hospital, bathing patients in light and color, reminding us that healing comes not only from medicine but also from beauty. And Yaacov Agam, the father of kinetic art, brought movement, color, and spirit into form, filling museums and public spaces in Israel and beyond with works that shift and change as the viewer engages them — a reminder that Jewish creativity is alive, dynamic, and ever-evolving.

Tel Aviv's White City of Bauhaus architecture, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a testament to Israel's ability to merge heritage with modern design. And the Israel Museum's Shrine of the Book, built to house the Dead Sea Scrolls, is itself an architectural prayer—white stone rising like a promise that our most ancient texts will never be lost again.

The arts are not an adornment; they are part of Israel's survival story. They remind us that to be fully alive is to create, to imagine, to express joy and longing. As the Psalmist commands: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise God with trumpet sound, with lute and harp, with tambourine and dance." Israel has taken that commandment to heart, offering the world symphonies, novels, paintings, films, dance, and song.

When we stand back and see it whole—Israel's humanitarian work, its medical breakthroughs, its technological inventions, its defense of life, and its artistic gifts—we recognize that the Jewish state's right to exist is not simply about protecting Jews from danger. It is about ensuring that the world continues to receive the blessing of Jewish creativity, memory, and conscience.

Israel, like each of us, is still becoming. The divisions we see—political, religious, generational—can be painful, yet they are also signs of a society alive, a democracy still shaping itself. In a region often marked by authoritarian rule, it remains a singular voice of democratic struggle and hope. The rabbis of the Talmud taught, "These and these are the words of the living God" — reminding us that truth can emerge from opposing voices, and that even conflict may serve a higher purpose. The debates within Israel are not a sign of failure; they are a sign of vitality, the natural reformation of a state still shaping its soul. Out of argument comes refinement. Out of struggle comes growth.

And yet we know that in our time, Israel is too often spoken of only through the lens of conflict or criticism. Headlines cannot capture the spirit of a people who rose from ashes to

plant vineyards, to revive a language, to heal the sick, to send aid across the world, to create beauty out of brokenness. As Reform Jews, we are called to hold complexity honestly — but we must not let criticism cause us to forget love. The birth of Israel was not an accident of politics; it was a necessity of survival. And more than survival, it was the rebirth of covenant. To lose faith in Israel would be to lose faith in our own capacity to bless the world. We may debate policies, but we must never forget the purpose: Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, a beacon of resilience and renewal, and a living reminder that the Jewish story is not finished.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote, “The Jewish people are the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.” Israel is that voice made visible, tangible, audible. Its very survival is a source of hope—not only for Jews, but for the world.

The shofar’s cry does not only stir our memory; it awakens our soul. It reminds us that creation is ongoing, that God’s promise to Abraham still unfolds before our eyes: “Through you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Israel is the living thread of that covenant — a small nation carrying the weight of an ancient dream, yet offering blessings far beyond its borders. Medicines that heal, technologies that connect, art that inspires, courage that protects — these are the blossoms of Isaiah’s desert.

And so we stand with pride: pride in Israel’s courage and creativity, pride in the Jewish spirit that cannot be extinguished, pride in belonging to a people whose gifts continue to bless humanity. For as the prophet Zechariah taught, “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.” It is spirit that sustains us, spirit that drives us forward, and spirit that ensures our covenant endures.

As the year begins anew, may we add our own blossoms to this garden of covenant, offering our lives as testimony that God's promise lives on — and that to be a Jew is to be a bearer of blessing for the world.

Ken yehi ratzon. So may it be God's will.