

**Rabbi Josh Beraha**  
**“Projecting What Matters”**  
**Temple Micah, Washington, D.C.**  
**June 6, 2025**

What does it mean to be seen, and to be heard, as an institution?

Outside our building, we’ve made a choice to be seen. A pride flag. A banner that reads “Remember the St. Louis.” An Israeli flag. And permanently etched in stone: the Ten Commandments and Stars of David.

These are declarations—projected outward and into the public square.

And one message they convey is this: we are a Jewish community that stands for human dignity. The pride flag proclaims that every human being is created in the image of God. The Israeli flag affirms the right of the Jewish people to live in peace in our ancestral homeland, alongside our neighbors. And the banner “Remember the St. Louis,” represents our moral obligation to the vulnerable and the displaced.

I wish we lived in a world where these truths were self-evident. Where it was universally understood: to be human is to be in relationship. We become who we are not in isolation, but in the space between us and the Other. (Hasn’t everyone read Buber?!?)

But that is not the world we live in. In response, we project symbols to make visible what matters. Because social systems aren’t fixed. They are constructed—through rituals like raising a banner, through signs, and through language.

To channel Heschel: what we’re witnessing in the public square today is not just polarization—it’s a collapse of moral imagination. And in that vacuum, weaponized language rushes in to fill the void. Spray-painted graffiti, like we saw last week at our rabbinical school in New York. Stickers slapped on street signs. Derogatory chants at rallies. Crude memes spreading like wildfire online. These are words that don’t argue but assault and dehumanize and leave behind a depleted moral landscape.

We’ve heard and seen them. “There’s no Adam and Steve.” “Restore biological truths.” “Globalize the intifada.” “Go back to where you came.” “Jews will not replace us.” These are not neutral phrases. They are signals, and symbols. And when seen, and heard, they shape a world in which dignity is denied.

I think part of the reason what we project and what we say matters so deeply right now is because *none of this is theoretical*. These are not abstract threats.

Just this week, Jews in Colorado were attacked with molotov cocktails while peacefully marching for the release of hostages. And recently, as we know, two young people were murdered outside the Capitol Jewish Museum—not because they worked at the Israeli embassy, but simply for being part of a Jewish event.

Earlier this year, at Stonewall—the birthplace of the modern LGBTQ movement—memorial signs and benches were removed by the Trump administration. A deliberate act in a broader campaign to erase queer and trans rights.

To be sure, antisemitism, homophobia, and xenophobia have different roots. *But they grow in the same climate*—one of fear and erasure. And so—we project. We speak. Because the alternative is silence, and silence, as Elie Wiesel said upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, helps the oppressor, never the victim.

Our tradition knows this too. “Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” “Who says your blood is redder than your neighbor’s?”

You don’t have to look hard to see that the Torah affirms human dignity at every turn. This week, I’m thinking particularly of David and Jonathan—a relationship the Torah doesn’t hide or downplay, but places front and center. It describes their bond with the words, “וַיִּבְרְכֵם יְהוָה בְּיָמָיו וְיָמֵי דָוִד וְיָמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָמֵי יְהוֹנָתָן וְיָמֵי דָוִד וְיָמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָמֵי יְהוֹנָתָן וְיָמֵי דָוִד” —“Jonathan’s soul became bound up with the soul of David” (1 Samuel 18:1). It’s a love that’s *public* and *unqualified*.

What happens when we do hide? Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, in *The Masks Jews Wear*, warns that when we disguise ourselves—as good citizens, or loyal liberals—we flatten our faith. A hidden Judaism, he writes, forgets how to speak.

The same is true for any identity or status. If we are queer or trans or undocumented or Jewish, and we are forced to hide that identity—whether out of fear, or because laws or language tell us we don’t belong—then we are diminished, and we break the chain of responsibility.

As Levinas taught: I am responsible for myself, for the other, and for the other’s responsibility to me. *There is no end to the demands of dignity*. So we choose visibility. Not because it is safe. But because it is *sacred*. And through this, we proclaim that being part of a covenantal community of Jews, and humans, calls us to protect love and to resist cruelty. This is what a synagogue is meant to do—to help us speak truthfully and give us language for what matters.

It’s clear we’re in need of a new, *shared*, moral code. But we can’t get there without a *shared* vocabulary—some way to talk about right and wrong that’s bigger than personal

preference. Without that, we have... what we see today. And to be part of the Jewish conversation is to speak our values aloud—to live them where others can see and hear.

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The scholar, Hilary Putnam, in *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, wrote that a mitzvah isn't just a commandment—it's part of a system meant to bring sanctity into every part of life. That's what our language and our symbols do. *They are mitzvot made visible*. They remind us, and the world, who we are.

So we'll keep speaking clearly.

And choosing visibility.

It's what our tradition, and this moment, asks of us.

Shabbat shalom.