

When our Jewish Beliefs are Threatened

Kehillat Shabbat service, Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

Shabbat Shuvah

September 19, 2026

Rabbi Fred N. Reiner

Today is Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of Repentance or “Return,” the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. You may not know it, but historically the sermon on this Shabbat morning is supposed to be the most important sermon of the year, along with Shabbat Hagadol, the Sabbath before Passover. The task of the preacher (historically, the rabbi) on this Shabbat is to move the congregation towards the repentance and introspection that we all need to do in these days. There were no sermons on the evening or morning of Rosh Hashanah nor Yom Kippur. Instead the big sermonic message was this morning. So I approach this assignment with appropriate seriousness and trepidation.

The Torah portion this Shabbat is *Haazinu*, as we have heard. Called The Song of Moses, it is biblical poetry, the prophet’s penultimate words of summation before the assembled Israelites, shortly before his death. It stands out in the Torah, written in two columns, with all its dramatic content. Interestingly, Hebrew Union College used to require all its rabbinic students in previous generations to memorize this poem, including—I believe—Rabbis Brickner and Lipman. I was spared that requirement in my generation, but the form and content are intriguing nevertheless.

A word about Biblical Hebrew poetry: there is no rhyming nor counting of syllables. Rather each line or couplet states and restates in parallel the same idea twice, using synonyms and stressed syllables. The opening lines of Haazinu are:

Haazinu Hashamayim vaadaberah; v'tishma haaretz imrei-fi:

Give ear, heavens, let me speak; Let the earth **hear** the words I utter.

The text goes on to condemn:

God is faithful, true and upright; [but] Israel is unworthy and perverse: a good High Holy Day message.

Haazinu calls us to account and begins with stating the importance of listening.

Listening, of course, is a primary commandment in the Torah and in Judaism. We say that Sh'ma Yisrael is the watchword of Judaism, a statement of core values.

We are commanded to **listen** God's word.

Similarly, we are commanded to listen to our core beliefs.

Consequently, at this time of year we may well ask ourselves:

What **do** we believe as Reform or Liberal Jews today? How do our beliefs guide us in our lives...and in our communities and nation?

Think back to February, 2025, as the new administration was taking hold and new executive orders were flying out of the White House every day. There was a lot of teeth-gnashing at the shock of these sudden pronouncements—and so many of us were wondering, “What can we do?”

I participate in a weekly Zoom call of retired Reform rabbis in the Washington area. In addition to meeting occasionally in person, we chat most every Friday morning about what concerns us, and the “What can we do?” question, of course, was on our minds. I said that the lawyers in our midst can file briefs and seek injunctions, the journalists can write op-eds and Substacks, but what we deal with as rabbis is beliefs. That is not all we deal with, of course, but in beliefs we are the experts, or at least supposedly.

I said that these executive orders and the political environment from which they emerged was deeply challenging to many of our core beliefs. I thought our response could be to restate those beliefs for ourselves, for one another, and for our Jewish communities. I agreed to draft a Statement of Jewish Beliefs and bring it back to the group.

I did that, and after some discussion and editing, we decided to share it with other colleagues. We then sent it around to other Jewish clergy, took it to meetings and conventions, and invited our colleagues to join us in adding their names to this statement. By the time we were done, over 600 rabbis and cantors from all over the country had added their names to the statement, including all our Temple Sinai clergy. We decided not to seek organizational endorsements, but only use the names and cities of our colleagues.

In my opinion the statement did not break new theological ground, but simply restated what we believe as American Jews today. The goal was to state our beliefs clearly, especially those beliefs that were challenged by the policies that the new administration was announcing. Indeed, each statement opposed a new

executive order or statement from the White House. Here are the ten beliefs in this statement:

A 2025 Statement of Jewish Beliefs

In this time of swirling events and governmental chaos, it is important to remind ourselves of our core beliefs as American Jews. These are some of the values we hold dear and which guide our lives and our actions.

1. We believe that all people are the children of God, endowed with holiness, all equal in value. (Gen. 1:27)
2. We believe in welcoming the stranger, the alien in our midst, the one who lives with us. (Lev. 19:33) We are commanded to love the stranger as ourselves. We are a people of repeated migrations, descended from strangers in Egypt.
3. We believe in honesty, commanded not to bear false witness (Ex. 20:13, Lev. 19:11)
4. We believe in listening respectfully, valuing the ideas of those who disagree, and seeking peace. (Avot 1:12, 1:18)
5. We believe in fairness in business and all transactions: not engaging in fraud, paying workers promptly, honestly representing what is offered. (Lev. 19:13; 19:35-6)
6. We believe in respect for others, especially for the strangers among us, for elders and those less fortunate, and all who struggle. We are commanded not to take advantage of the weakness of others, not to place a stumbling block before the blind. (Lev. 19:32; 19:14) We feel it is important to engage in acts of kindness and believe that we are in relationship with all people and should behave with compassion and empathy. (Avot 1:2)
7. We call what we give to others *tzedakah*, giving based on justice. We believe in the importance of compassion, but what we give to others in need is based on seeking justice in society. (Deut. 16:20; Amos 5:24)
8. We believe in knowledge and the exchange of ideas, including minority viewpoints. We value learning and the advancement of knowledge, in science, in literature, sacred and secular. (Avot 1:16)
9. We believe in respecting and caring for our world, for tending the land and acting as dedicated stewards. (Gen 1:29-30 and Lev. 19:23 ff.)
10. We cherish the religious freedom in the United States and celebrate the diversity of beliefs and practices in our country. We deeply value the American Constitutional guarantees separating religion and state that have made possible the flourishing of all religions in our country.

These beliefs continue today, as they have for centuries. But the domestic policies that violate these beliefs have only become more numerous and troubling in the year and a half since this statement was written and released.

Today I especially want to focus on the last point: American religious freedom and the separation of religion and state, as enshrined in our Constitution. It is, of course, an American belief, not specifically a Jewish value. As Jews, we do not proclaim that ours is the only legitimate religion, but one among many. We respect other religious faiths and traditions and know that the plurality of religions in the United States has meant that Judaism has been able to flourish in the history of our nation as one religion among many.

But today those values are under serious threat with the rise of Christian Nationalism, which teaches that the United States is a Christian country, and (they would say) always has been. If that were the case, then where would we Jews fit in? Would we be “guests”? Would we be welcome or unwelcome? If our nation is really a Christian country, could Jews be “real Americans”? There are echoes here of dual loyalty, that we Jews have experienced over the centuries in European countries with a state religion. Repeatedly the question was asked, “Are the Jews loyal to our country or to Judaism?” If we live in a Christian country, how far away is official antisemitism?

Clearly the United States was founded on the principle of religious pluralism, as a haven from religious persecution. Our Constitution is clear that there is no state religion, and our history tells the stories of people coming to our shores seeking freedom from religious persecution: Pilgrims, Puritans, Quakers, Mormons,

Unitarians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, as well as Jews. Today we welcome Moslems, Hindus, and Buddhists, as well.

Do we live in a Christian nation? That is the wrong question. Christian Nationalists **should** be asking (or, rather, asserting) that we live in a **religious** nation, and **that** contention is historically correct. My professor of sociology of religion, Robert Bellah, developed the idea that in the United States we have a **civil religion**. It is a common set of beliefs to which all religious groups can subscribe. And we understand that some real Americans do not belong to any religion; nor do they have any religious beliefs.

The Pew Research Center has studied and published a list of the religious affiliation of U.S. Presidents, showing over a dozen different religious traditions. It is particularly important that four presidents have had no formal religious affiliation: Thomas Jefferson, a Deist and a strong believer in the separation of religion and state; Abraham Lincoln, whose writings (as Jefferson's) clearly speak of religious beliefs, but not of Christianity; Andrew Johnson, and ironically Donald Trump, who might say that he is a Christian, but is not a member of any Christian denomination. Several other presidents are members of religious faiths that are not considered Christian by all: Unitarians and Quakers, for example.

Clearly the United States has a long history of religious diversity that has encouraged many religions to flourish in our nation, including Judaism in its

diversity. It is not that we are **tolerant** of minority religions. We **welcome** all religions and value the contributions that they and their followers bring to our country. They bring their sacred texts and their songs, and we listen and understand our own songs and texts in a new light.

At this season, and in these High Holy Days, we are called to listen. But listening is always difficult, and especially difficult today, with so much background noise and so many voices screaming for our attention.

Let us listen to the words of Rabbi Leo Baeck, in his extraordinary prayer written to be read from the pulpit of every German synagogue on Yom Kippur in 1935. The Nuremburg Laws had been passed just in the previous month, severely limiting the role of Jews in Nazi Germany. How could the Jewish community respond?

Rabbi Baeck wrote these words for Yom Kippur and distributed them to every congregation in Germany:

We stand before our God...We commit ourselves to our faith and to our future. Who announced to the world the mystery of...the one God? Who revealed to the world a sense for the purity of human conduct...? Who gave the world respect for the human being, the image of God? Who directed the world to the commandment of justice, to the social idea?...In our Judaism it matured and it still grows. These facts refute every slander [leveled against us].ⁱ

The Nazi government learned about this statement and threatened and pressured Rabbi Baeck to withdraw the statement, so he wrote to all the congregations instructing them not to read it, but the words and ideas still live with us.

I do not say, for a moment, that we are living in an equivalent time. But our time is indeed profoundly challenging to the values and beliefs that Judaism teaches and proclaims.

We need to listen to our core Jewish beliefs, to listen to the challenges that confront us as Jews. May these days of introspection help us to find renewal of our beliefs and to understand how what we believe can guide our actions and our lives.

ⁱ Text in Leo Baeck Institute; translated by Michael Meyer.