

5-Alarm Fire: Chuck Schumer's Speech on Antisemitism



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by U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer

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The highest-ranking Jewish elected official in American history gave a lengthy, passionate speech on Nov. 29 on the Senate floor. Worth printing out and reading.

Today, I come to the floor to speak on a subject of great importance: the rise of antisemitism in America.

I feel compelled to speak because I am the highest-ranking Jewish elected official in America; in fact, the highest-ranking Jewish elected official ever in American history.

And I have noticed a significant disparity between how Jewish people regard the rise of antisemitism, and how many of my non-Jewish friends regard it.

To the Jewish people, the rise of antisemitism is a crisis—a five-alarm fire that must be extinguished.

To us, the Jewish people, the rise of antisemitism is a crisis—a five-alarm fire that must be extinguished.

For so many other people of goodwill, it is merely a problem, a matter of concern.

Today, I want to use my platform to explain why so many Jewish people see this problem as a crisis.

But before I get into that, I want to offer two important caveats about what this speech is not. This speech is not an attempt to label most criticism of Israel and the Israeli government generally as antisemitic. I don't believe that criticism is. And this speech is also not an attempt to pit hate towards one group against that of another.

I believe that bigotry against one group of Americans is bigotry against all, and that's why I have championed legislation like the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, which targets violence against Asian Americans, and the Nonprofit

Security Grant Program, which provides funding to help all houses of worship—churches, mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras—protect themselves from extremists.

When President Trump called for a Muslim ban during the first weeks of his presidency, I held an emergency press conference to protest the ban alongside a Muslim mom and four of her daughters, all dressed in chadors, who said they feared they might never see their father again.

It was a deeply distressing moment, and I'm an emotional sort. I began to cry. President Trump saw me crying on TV and gave me a nickname: "Cryin' Chuck Schumer."

I was—and am—proud of that moniker. The growing and vibrant Arab American community is a vital part of our nation and of my city, and I condemn—unequivocally—any vitriol and hatred against them.

We tragically saw where such hatred can sometimes lead in Vermont this week. This is unacceptable.

But today, I want to focus my remarks on antisemitism because it hits so close to home for me—and because I believe this moment demands it.

I have just said what this speech is not. So what *is* this speech about?

I want to describe the fears and anxieties of many Jewish Americans right now, particularly after Oct. 7, who feel there are aspects of the debate around Israel and Gaza that are crossing over into antisemitism, with Jewish people being targeted simply for being Jewish and having nothing to do with Israel.

I want to explain, through the lens of history, why this is so dangerous. The normalization and exacerbation of this rise in hate is the danger many Jewish people fear most.

And finally, I want to suggest how and why I hope that all Americans of goodwill can come together and do a better job of condemning such views and behavior.

But first, let's establish the facts. There is no question that antisemitism is a serious problem in America:

In general, Jewish Americans represent 2% of the U.S. population, yet we are the targets of 55% of all religion-based hate crimes recorded by the FBI. This problem has been steadily worsening in recent years, but after Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, hate crimes against Jewish Americans have skyrocketed.

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The Anti-Defamation League estimates that antisemitic incidents have increased nearly 300% since Oct. 7. The NYPD has recorded a 214% increase in New York City.

After Oct. 7, Jewish Americans are feeling singled out, targeted and isolated. In many ways, we feel alone.

The solidarity that Jewish Americans initially received from many of our fellow citizens was quickly drowned out by other voices.

While the dead bodies of Jewish Israelis were still warm, while hundreds of Jewish Israelis were being carried as hostages back to Hamas tunnels under Gaza, Jewish Americans were alarmed to see some of our fellow citizens characterize a brutal terrorist attack as justified because of the actions of the Israeli government.

A vicious, bloodcurdling, premeditated massacre of innocent men, women, children, the elderly—justified!

Even worse, in some cases, people even celebrated what happened, describing it as the deserved fate of quote “colonizers” and calling for quote “glory to the martyrs” who carried out these heinous attacks.

Many of the people who have expressed these sentiments in America aren’t neo-Nazis, or card-carrying Klan members, or Islamist extremists. They are in

many cases people that most liberal Jewish Americans felt previously were their ideological fellow travelers.

Not long ago, many of us marched together for black and brown lives, we stood against anti-Asian hatred, we protested bigotry against the LGBTQ community, we fought for reproductive justice out of the recognition that injustice against one oppressed group is injustice against all.

But apparently, in the eyes of some, that principle does not extend to the Jewish people.

The largely Ashkenazi survivors of decades of pogroms in Imperial Russia, the Holocaust under Nazi Germany, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; the Mizrahi, who were forcibly evicted from Arab countries, and their descendants; the many Sephardim who were scattered across the Mediterranean after they were expelled from Spain and Portugal in the late 1400s—do they not deserve the solidarity of those who advocate for the rights and dignity of the oppressed, given the long history of persecution of the Jewish people throughout the world?

Many of those protesting Israeli policy note the at least 700,000 Palestinians displaced or forced from their homes in 1948, but they never mention the 600,000 Mizrahi Jews across the Arab world who were also displaced, whose property was confiscated, whose lives were threatened, who were expelled from their communities.

The hope at the time was that there would be two states. A Jewish state and a Palestinian state living side-by-side. The plan was for the State of Israel to absorb the Jewish people in Arab lands, and the new Palestinian state to absorb the Palestinians who now lived in Israel. In fact, Israel did absorb [the displaced Jewish people of Arab lands](#), but the Arab nations instead sanctioned the United Nations to set up refugee camps for the Palestinians, refusing to accept the possibility that any of them would ever be relocated.

Several times throughout history, Israeli prime ministers called for a return to close to the pre-1967 borders established by the United Nations plan. Those calls were rejected by Yasser Arafat, the PLO and the wider Arab community.

Many, if not most, Jewish Americans, including myself, support a two-state solution. We disagree with Prime Minister Netanyahu and his administration's

encouragement of militant settlers in the West Bank, which has become a considerable obstacle to a two-state solution.

The reason why I invoke this history about the founding of the Israeli State is because forgetting or even deliberately ignoring this vital context is dangerous. Some of the most extreme rhetoric against Israel has emboldened antisemites who are attacking Jewish people simply because they are Jewish, independent of anything having to do with Israel.

Those who are inclined to examine the world through the lens of the oppressors versus the oppressed should take note that the many thousands of years of Jewish history are defined by oppression.

From Oct. 7, 2023, in Southern Israel to 2018 at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh to 1999 at the Los Angeles JCC to 1986 at Neve Shalom synagogue in Istanbul to 1974 at Netev Meir Elementary School in Ma'alot to Yom Kippur, 1973 in the Golan Heights to 1972 at the Munich Olympics and Lod Airport to 1967 at the Straits of Tiran to the 1940s and 30s in Germany and Central Europe to the 1800s in the Pale of Settlement to 1679 in Yemen to 1492 in Spain, 1394 in France, 1290 in England to the Crusades of the Middle Ages to 629 in Galilee to the Year 73 in Jerusalem to 586 B.C. in Judea 722 BCE in Samaria ... and the 13th Century BCE in Egypt the Jewish people have been humiliated, ostracized, expelled, enslaved and massacred for millennia.

To paraphrase lines recited year every year, century after century, at Passover over the seder table: "This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. In every generation, they rise up to destroy us."

For Jewish people all across the world, the history of our trauma going back many generations is central to any discussion about our future.

Too many Americans, especially in our younger generation, don't have a full understanding of this history. Because some Jewish people have done well in America, because Israel has increased its power and territory, there are people who feel that Jewish Americans are not vulnerable, that we have the strength and security to overcome prejudice and bigotry, that we have, to quote the language of some, become the "oppressors."

In fact, antisemitic conspiracy theories often weaponize this very dynamic by pitting what successes the Jewish people have achieved against them, and against their fellow countrymen.

For many Jewish Americans, any strength and security that we enjoy always feels tenuous.

But for many Jewish Americans, any strength and security that we enjoy always feels tenuous. No matter how well we're doing, it can all be taken away in an instant.

That's just how it is. We only have to look back a century, a few generations, to see how this can happen.

Growing up, I remember my grandfather telling me that he rooted for Germany over Russia in World War I because Germans treated the Jewish people so much better than Russia did. In the early 1900s, German Jews were one of the most secure and prosperous ethnic communities in Europe.

But in the span of a decade, all of that changed. When the Nazis first marched in the streets and held rallies decrying the so-called international financiers, war profiteers, and communists, many Germans of goodwill either stayed silent or marched alongside them, not necessarily realizing what they were aiding and abetting.

But when Adolf Hitler took the podium just a few years later at the Reichstag, it was clear by then that the terms "international financiers, war profiteers and Communists" represented the Jewish people, who Hitler called "parasites" feeding on the body and productive work of other nations.

By bits and pieces, the Nazis softened the ground rhetorically for what Hitler eventually stated was his true goal: "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

And so many of those Germans of goodwill, who marched in the early years of Hitler's ascension, stayed on the sidelines after his horrifying intent was made clear.

The end result, as we all know, was the most targeted and systematic genocide in human history. Six million Jewish people were exterminated in a few years while others turned a blind eye.

History shows that antisemitism is deeply embedded in Europe. I have always said it is the poison of European society—just as racism against Black Americans is the poison of our society.

And while we are thankfully a far ways away from Nazi Germany today, this is why many Jewish people worry about the marches today, especially in Europe.

What may begin as legitimate criticism of Israeli policy , or even a valid debate over other religious, economic , and political issues, can sometimes cross into something darker, into attacking Jewish people simply for being Jewish.

Obviously, many of those marching here in the U.S. do not have any evil intent, but when Jewish people hear chants like "From the river to the sea," a founding slogan of Hamas, a terrorist group that is not shy about their goal to eradicate the Jewish people, in Israel and around the globe, we are alarmed.

When we see signs in the crowd that read "By Any Means Necessary," after the most violent attack ever against Israeli civilians, we are appalled at the casual invocation of such savagery.

When we see protesters at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade compare the genocide of the Holocaust equivalently to the Israeli army's actions to defeat Hamas in self-defense of their people, we are shocked.

And when we see many people and news organizations remain neutral about the basic absurdity of these claims and actions, we are deeply disappointed.

More than anything, we are worried—quite naturally, given the twists and turns of history—about where these actions and sentiments could eventually lead.

For many Jewish people, it feels like a matter of survival, informed once again by history.

Now, this is no intellectual exercise for us. For many Jewish people, it feels like a matter of survival, informed once again by history—in this case, very personal history.

Take the story of my own family.

My grandfather came to Ellis Island at a very young age from Eastern Europe, without an education or a penny to his name. He was a street urchin, stealing apples off pushcarts just to survive, but he dreamt of a brighter future for himself and for his family.

My grandfather ended up with the paper workers in Utica, New York, and helped form the union there, but he lost his job in the lead-up to World War II, so he came back to New York City and bought a little exterminating business.

His son—my father—followed in his footsteps and eventually took over that exterminating business. My father struggled in that job, barely making ends meet. But together with my mother, he provided a stable and loving home in Brooklyn for my siblings and me, where we were able to flourish.

And because of the tolerance and openness and opportunity that courses through all of American life, I now stand before you as the majority leader of the United States Senate, the highest elected office a Jewish person has ever attained in the history of this country.

Only in America could an exterminator's son grow up to be the first Jewish party leader in the Senate.

But it must also be said: this is not the norm in the grand and long scheme of Jewish history.

While my grandfather came to America and encountered opportunity, many of his siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and other family members remained behind in Eastern Europe.

When I was still a young boy, I was told why many branches of our family tree stopped growing forever.

In 1941, when the Nazis invaded Ukraine, then part of Galicia, they asked my great-grandmother—the matriarch of the family, and the wife of a locally revered rabbi—to gather her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren on the porch of her home, which was in the town square.

When the Nazis told my great-grandmother, “You are coming with us,” she refused—and they machine-gunned down every last one of them. The babies, the elderly and everybody in-between.

As more than 30 people gathered on the porch, aged 85-years-old to 3 months, the Nazis forced the remaining Jewish citizens of the town to gather around and watch.

When the Nazis told my great-grandmother, “You are coming with us,” she refused—and they machine-gunned down every last one of them. The babies, the elderly and everybody in-between.

This story resonated deeply in my heart when I first started learning the details of the Oct. 7 massacre in Israel. I was in China with a bipartisan delegation of my fellow senators, trying to get President Xi Jinping to open up Chinese markets to American companies and stop the flow of fentanyl across our borders.

As the horrors of Oct. 7 started coming into focus, the Israeli ambassador to China shared with me the story of what she heard had just happened in one of the kibbutzim, called Be'eri.

Hamas terrorists entered the kibbutz early on Oct. 7 and killed more than 120 Jewish residents, from the elderly to babies.

Sadly, it was not the first time I had heard of such evil being committed against Jewish people.

Most, if not all, Jewish Americans know stories similar to that of my family. And most, if not all of us, learned this story at a young age. It will be imprinted on our hearts for as long as we live.

All Jewish Americans carry in them the scar tissue of this generational trauma, and that directly informs how we are experiencing and processing the rhetoric of today.

We see and hear things differently from others because we are deeply sensitive to the deprivation and horrors that can follow the targeting of Jewish people—if it is not repudiated.

Which brings me back to today.

While many protesters no doubt view their actions as a compassionate expression of solidarity with the Palestinian people, for many Jewish Americans, we feel in too many instances, some of the most extreme rhetoric gives license to darker ideas that have always lurked below the surface of every question involving the Jewish people.

Antisemites have always trafficked in coded language and action to define Jewish people as unworthy of the rights and privileges afforded to other groups.

I believe there are plenty of people who chant “[From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free](#)” not because they hate Jewish people, but because they support a better future for Palestinians.

But there is no question that Hamas and other terrorist organizations have used this slogan to represent their intention to eliminate Jewish people not only from Israel but from every corner of the Earth.

Given the history of oppression, expulsion, and state violence that is practically embedded in Jewish DNA, can you blame Jewish people for hearing a violently antisemitic message, loud and clear, any time we hear that chant?

We shouldn't accept this sort of language from anybody any more than we accept other racist dog whistles—like invoking “welfare queens” to criticize safety net programs, or calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus.”

And that also goes for extreme right-wing Jewish settlers who also use deplorable language, and who don't believe there should be any Palestinians between the river and the sea.

Antisemites are taking advantage of the pro-Palestinian movement to espouse hatred and bigotry towards Jewish people. But rather than call out this dangerous behavior for what it is, we see so many of our friends and fellow citizens, particularly young people who yearn for justice, unknowingly aiding and abetting their cause.

And worse, many of our friends and allies whose support we need now more than ever during this moment of immense Jewish pain have brushed aside these concerns. Suddenly, they do not want to hear about antisemitism or the ultimate goal of Hamas. When I have asked some of the marchers what they would do about Hamas, they don't have an answer. Many don't seem to care.

Can you understand why Jewish people feel isolated when we hear some praise Hamas and chant its vicious slogan?

And so Jewish Americans are left alone—at least in our eyes—to ponder what this all means, and where it could lead.

Can you understand why Jewish people feel isolated when we hear some praise Hamas and chant its vicious slogan? Can you blame us for feeling vulnerable only 80 years after Hitler wiped out half of the Jewish population

across the world while many countries turned their back? Can you appreciate the deep fear we have about what Hamas might do if left to their own devices?

Because the long arc of Jewish history teaches us a lesson that is hard to forget: ultimately, that we are alone.

As a teenager, growing up halfway across the world from Israel in Brooklyn during the 1950s and '60s, I remember feeling that aloneness myself.

When many of the world's airlines boycotted Israel so that they could maintain business with the Arab world, I admired Air France because only they would fly to Israel. I even preferred Coca-Cola to Pepsi because they did business in Israel, and refused to participate in any biased boycott. Later, I remember walking in solitary silence to class at James Madison High School with a transistor radio held to my ear, listening to the news reports about the Six-Day War and praying to God that Israel would survive.

On top of feeling alone, the second dominant feeling that Jewish people have endured throughout history has been the sting of the double standard, which is the way the world has practiced antisemitism over and over again.

To Jewish people, the double standard has been ever present and is at the root of antisemitism. The double standard is very simple:

Because the long arc of Jewish history teaches us a lesson that is hard to forget: ultimately, that we are alone.

What is good for everybody, is never good for the Jew. When it comes time to assign blame for some problem, the Jew is always the first target.

And in recent decades, this double standard has manifested itself in the way much of the world treats Israel differently than anybody else.

That double standard was made clear to me when I was in college.

I remember the day when the great and articulate Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Abba Eban was invited to come lecture on campus, while the Students for a Democratic Society and the Progressive Labor Party were waging a campaign against Israel's right to exist.

Two thousand people gathered in a large auditorium to see Ambassador Eban, and the members of SDS and PLP sat in the gallery and hung a banner saying: "Fight the Zionist Imperialists."

When the members of the SDS and the PLP tried to shout him down, Eban pointed his finger up at the protesters in the gallery, and with his Etonian inflection, he calmly but strongly delivered a statement I will never forget, and that I will paraphrase now.

He said: "I am talking to you up there in the gallery. Every time a people gets their statehood, you applaud it. The Nigerians, the Pakistanis, the Zambians, you applaud their getting statehood. There's only one people, when they gain statehood, who you don't applaud, you condemn it—and that is the Jewish people. We Jews are used to that. We have lived with a double standard through the centuries. There were always things the Jews couldn't do ... everyone could be a farmer, but not the Jew. Everyone could be a carpenter, but not the Jew. Everyone could move to Moscow, but not the Jew. And everyone can have their own state, but not the Jew. There is a word for that: antisemitism, and I accuse you in the gallery of it."

And the protesters slinked off.

This double standard persists today in America, and it is once again leaving Jewish people feeling isolated and alone.

In the immediate aftermath of Oct. 7, an attack on defenseless civilians, the elderly, women, and babies, a good number of people skipped over expressing sympathy for the victims in their haste to blame the attack on the past actions of the Israeli government. Can anybody imagine a horrific terrorist attack in another country receiving such a reception?

And when Hamas terrorists actively hide behind innocent Palestinians, knowing that many of those civilians will die in the Israeli response, why does the criticism for any civilian deaths seem to fall exclusively on Israel, and not at all on Hamas?

My heart breaks for the thousands of Palestinian civilians who have been killed or are suffering in this conflict, and I have urged the Israeli government to minimize civilian casualties on many occasions.

Hamas has knowingly invited an immense civilian toll during this war.

But by committing such heinous atrocities on Oct. 7 before sneaking back into their tunnels underneath hospitals and refugee camps in Gaza, Hamas has knowingly invited an immense civilian toll during this war, exploiting the double standard that so much of the world applies to Israel.

Of course, let me repeat: that does not relieve Israel of the responsibility to protect innocent Palestinian lives, and I have been among the first to tell Israeli leaders they must act according to international law. I am also fighting for critical humanitarian aid for Palestinians—that this Senate, under my leadership, is working to deliver.

So I rise in this chamber today. I am speaking up to issue a warning, informed by the lessons of history.

No matter what our beliefs are, no matter where we stand on the war in Gaza, all of us must condemn antisemitism with full-throated clarity whenever we see it before it metastasizes into something even worse.

Because right now, that's what Jewish Americans fear most.

The spike in antisemitism we are experiencing right now in America began after the worst instance of violence committed against Jewish people since the Holocaust. The vitriol against Israel in the wake of Oct. 7 is all too often crossing a line into brazen and widespread antisemitism, the likes of which we haven't seen for generations in this country—if ever.

Which is why we need to name it clearly any time we see it:

After Oct. 7, when boycotts were organized against Jewish businesses in Philadelphia that have nothing to do with Israel—that is antisemitism!

After Oct. 7, when swastikas appeared on Jewish delis on the Upper East Side—that is antisemitism!

After Oct. 7, when protesters in California shouted at Jewish Americans, “Hitler should’ve smashed you!”—that is antisemitism!

After Oct. 7, when a Jewish U.S. Senator was violently threatened for her views on Israel—that is antisemitism!

After Oct. 7, when students on college campuses across the country who wear a yarmulke or display a Jewish star are harassed, verbally vilified, pushed, and even spat upon and punched—that is antisemitism!

After Oct. 7, when an author in a prominent left-wing magazine labeled the pro-Israel rally in Washington a “hate rally”—that is antisemitism! I attended the rally because I believe there should be a place of refuge for the Jewish people. Not because I wish violence on Palestinians or any other people.

And after Oct. 7, when students at Hillcrest High School in Queens ran rampant in the hallways and demanded the firing of a teacher just because she attended a rally supporting Israel and forced her to hide in a locked office for hours while staff struggled to regain control—that is antisemitism!

Walking out of school to march in support of Palestinians is completely legitimate. But forcing a Jewish teacher to remain—as she described—locked in an office because she attended a rally in support for Israel is antisemitism, pure and simple.

In fact, that teacher is sitting in the gallery today. I invited her to come and listen, and I am truly honored that she accepted my invitation. That is true courage ... and I believe it shows just how strongly so many Jewish Americans feel about this issue.

She has requested anonymity, which I ask everybody present, and everybody in the media, to please respect.

But I say to her from the bottom of my heart: Thank you for being here, and thank you for caring.

I have just listed a few of the many examples of how pure, unadulterated antisemitism has dramatically increased since Oct. 7.

But the roots of pluralistic, multiethnic democracy are deep in America. This is a place where Jewish people have been able to flourish alongside so many other immigrant groups.

We must never lose sight of just how special that is. Nor must we ever stop fighting for it.

All Americans share a responsibility and an obligation to fight back whenever we see the rise of prejudice of any type in our midst.

All Americans share a responsibility and an obligation to fight back whenever we see the rise of prejudice of any type in our midst. To preserve this nation as a promised land of refuge, as a land that honors the dignity of every individual, as the land of opportunity for all.

So my plea to the American people of all creeds and backgrounds is this:

First, learn the history of the Jewish people, who have been abandoned repeatedly by their fellow countrymen—left isolated and alone to combat antisemitism—with disastrous results.

Second, reject the illogical and antisemitic double standard that is once again being applied to the plight of Jewish victims and hostages, to some of the actions of the Israeli government, and even to the very existence of a Jewish state.

Third, understand why Jewish people defend Israel—not because we wish harm on Palestinians, but because we fear a world where Israel is forced to tolerate the existence of groups like Hamas that want to wipe out all Jewish people from the planet. We fear a world where Israel, the place of refuge for Jewish people, will no longer exist. If there is no Israel, there will be no place, no place for the Jewish people to go when they are persecuted in other countries.

As an adult, I remember watching my grandfather, one of the few in his family to survive the Holocaust, become overwhelmed by emotion and break down in tears when he saw Israel for the first time.

This had nothing to do with politics, or with money, or with racism, or with oppressive colonial power. It was deeply human.

The emotional catharsis of a man whose family was uprooted and exterminated, finally stepping foot in a place of refuge for his people.

So many of my aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, would be alive today had Israel existed before World War II.

Many Jewish Americans fear what the future may bring, based on the repeated lessons of history.

Many Jewish Americans fear what the future may bring, based on the repeated lessons of history.

Many Jewish Americans see clear antisemitism in the double standard that is being wielded by too many opponents of Israel, and we see it in attacks on Jewish people simply for being Jewish, apart from anything having to do with Israel.

And perhaps worst of all, many Jewish Americans feel alone to face all of this, abandoned by too many of our friends and allies in our greatest time of need, as antisemitic hate crimes skyrocket around the country.

I implore every person and every community and every institution to stand with Jewish Americans and denounce antisemitism in all of its forms, especially the double standard that has been wielded against the Jewish people for generations to isolate us.

The time for solidarity must be now. Nothing less than the future of the American experiment hangs in the balance.

Building a more perfect union—one that fulfills our founding ideals—is our longest and most solemn struggle as a country. And as Americans, we are called to do all we can to achieve that higher standard.

We are stewards of the flames of liberty, tolerance and equality that warm our American melting pot, and make it possible for Jewish Americans to prosper alongside Palestinian Americans, and every other immigrant group from all over the world.

Are we a nation that can defy the regular course of human history, where the Jewish people have been ostracized, expelled and massacred over and over again?

I believe the answer can and must be a resounding, “Yes.”

And I will do everything in my power—as Senate majority leader, as a Jewish American, as a citizen of a free society, as a human being—to make it happen.

Ken y’hi ratzon.

May it be His will.