

Shabbat Parashat Vayigash 5786
Rabbi David Englander
The Last Shabbat of 2025

As you well know, we have together reached the final Shabbat of 2025. In some ways it is just like any other Shabbat, but at this time of year many people instinctively look back and ask, what happened this year? What changed? What surprised us?

For the Jewish people, I think the better question is a slightly different one. What kind of year was this for us, and what kind of Jewish people did it ask and challenge us to be?

Because this was not a year that fits neatly into a single emotional category. It was not simply a year of celebration or of fear, of pride or of pain, though it contained moments of each. It was, once again, a year of holding contradictions at the same time. Relief and anxiety. Gratitude and grief. Strength and vulnerability.

That, of course, is not new for Jews. We have long practiced the art of living with complexity. And I imagine you would agree that this past year asked a great deal of us, emotionally, morally, and communally.

One of the most powerful moments of the year was the release of the remaining living hostages held in Gaza, along with the return of nearly all of those who were killed. For many in Israel and across the Jewish world, that moment brought real joy and real relief. Families were reunited. Long months of agony finally gave way, at least in part, to closure. We experienced an echo of that relief, and bore witness to it, when we hosted Eli Sharabi right here not so long ago.

And yet even that joy was not uncomplicated. It was joy shaped by loss and shadowed by trauma. Joy that did not erase what had happened, or the uncertainty of what might still come, or questions about whether a tenuous but welcome end to the war in Gaza would hold or be reignited. It reminded us that for Jews, happiness and heartbreak often arrive together, and that we experienced much of both together as a worldwide Jewish family.

That emotional complexity set the tone for much of the year that followed.

The inauguration of President Donald Trump for a second, non-consecutive term once again placed Israel at the center of American Jewish political conversation. Many of his Israel-related policies were welcomed by broad segments of the Jewish community, particularly those who prioritize security and diplomatic support for the Jewish state. At the same time, domestic fault lines have continued to divide us ever more deeply, and we have to be wary of those divisions creating fully siloed Jewish communities, both inside and outside of Israel. That is a real risk, and one we are working hard to avoid.

And we can only do that by really listening to one another, and by giving everyone who is willing to engage in civilized dialogue the benefit of the doubt, trusting that they feel as strongly about their views as we feel about ours. As long as we are after the same thing, a better world marked by peace, security, and human dignity, there will continue to be much to talk about and much work to do. The challenge is remembering that argument is meant to sharpen us, not shatter us, and that certainty on any side becomes dangerous when it leaves no room for humility, or worse, no room for one another.

At the same time, the year brought renewed reminders of both Jewish strength and Jewish vulnerability.

This summer saw a punishing twelve-day war between Israel and Iran, following a major strike on Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. For many Israelis, the conflict reinforced a sense of existential threat and the ongoing reality that Israel lives in a dangerous region. For Jews in the Diaspora, it was another reminder that Israel's military power does not insulate Jewish communities elsewhere from fear or from violence. This entire era of unwelcome conflict, with Israel fighting a war it did not start, has too often become an excuse and a cover for antisemitism around the world.

Even with the strongest Israel in history, and even with many of us feeling firmly at home right here, our sense of vulnerability was tragically underscored by multiple deadly attacks on Jewish communities in the Diaspora this year, culminating in last week's terror attack in Sydney, Australia, in which fifteen people were killed and many more were injured. Each such attack reverberates far beyond its location. It reaches

synagogues, schools, and community centers across the world. It changes how people enter Jewish spaces and how openly Jews choose to live their Jewish lives.

Security has become a daily calculation, and an expensive one.

And yet, if vulnerability was one theme of the year, responsibility was another.

In the midst of fear, division, and uncertainty, the Jewish instinct to give did not retreat. In fact, it endured. Philanthropy is one way to understand areas of Jewish commitment, because the causes these dollars support are often carefully researched for their potential impact, both within the Jewish community and as part of our longstanding Jewish commitment to help others in need. This past year saw several extraordinary philanthropic commitments that spoke volumes about Jewish priorities and Jewish values.

Earlier this month, Michael and Susan Dell announced a \$6.25 billion pledge aimed at providing investment accounts for millions of American children, one of the largest philanthropic commitments of its kind. In Israel, Shmuel and Anat Harlap made a historic \$180 million gift to Rabin Medical Center, the largest donation ever made to an Israeli hospital. Other major gifts followed throughout the year, supporting universities, Jewish education, and medical centers, including significant contributions to Tel Aviv University, Jewish day schools in Cleveland, and Soroka Medical Center after it was damaged by an Iranian missile strike.

These were not symbolic gestures. They were acts of faith in the future. They signaled that even in a year marked by fear and fracture, Jews chose to invest, to rebuild, and to strengthen the institutions that sustain life and learning.

At a more local level, the surge in Jewish engagement that began earlier did not disappear in 2025, though it did begin to level off. Many people continued to show up more intentionally to Jewish spaces, seeking connection, meaning, and solidarity. At the same time, the Jewish organizational world faced hard truths. Funding shortfalls, leadership transitions, and demographic shifts led some institutions to close, merge, or radically rethink their missions.

Even the World Zionist Congress election, which we followed closely here and about which we communicated with you frequently, an event meant to model democratic Jewish life, was marred by allegations of fraud and bitter political infighting, leaving many disillusioned. And yet its overall result was positive for balance in how these funds will be spent, and we remain hopeful that it will lead to meaningful opportunities for further engagement for us and for other like-minded communities.

So where does that leave us as we step into a new year?

This past year taught us that Jewish life remains resilient, but not invulnerable. That unity cannot be assumed. That security must be actively protected. And that generosity, education, and moral responsibility are all needed if we are to move toward an even better future.

As we await our hazzan's return, we push ahead. In a small way, that captures what the Jewish people experienced in 2025. Challenge met with action. Uncertainty met with building. As much as we can, we do so with a combination of strength and compassion. We are able to do this because of our collective memory, because we have had to do it before. May we not see such intense challenges ahead, so that even more growth will be possible.

As we look ahead, the challenges are real. Concerns about Jewish security are not going away. Political divisions will not magically lead to mutual understanding or the respect that is so badly needed. Israel will continue to face complex and difficult choices. But the past year also showed us something enduring. When tested, the Jewish people continue to respond with responsibility, with commitment, and with an insistence on shaping a future worth inheriting.

May the year ahead bring greater safety, greater wisdom, and greater unity of purpose, even amid disagreement. And may we continue to meet the moment not as isolated individuals, but as a people bound together by memory, obligation, and hope.