

Forward

How a multi-faith, multiracial team of artists is waging a nationwide billboard campaign to fight antisemitism

'The Highest Form of Wisdom is Kindness' debuts in time for the High Holidays and looks to build solidarity in the face of hate.



Eric Gottesman's billboard, which asks viewers to think about connections between American patriotism and antisemitism, greets passersby in Atlanta, Georgia during the 2023 High Holidays. *Courtesy of Eric Gottesman*

By Sam Lin-Sommer

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This week, on a street corner in downtown Columbus, Ohio, the Hebrew phrase "Tikkun Olam," along with its translation, "Heal the World," is being displayed in crisp white, green and yellow print against a blue background.

The billboard, designed by visual artist Deborah Kass, is one of twelve arresting artworks popping up in seven states, and Washington, D.C., as part of The Highest Form of Wisdom is Kindness, a project aimed at fighting rising antisemitism in the United States. The campaign is the work of art collective For Freedoms, which has enlisted 13 artists — some Jewish, some not — for the effort, among them Kass, Hank Willis Thomas and Carrie Mae Weems.

The Highest Form of Wisdom is Kindness, which launched on September 5th, in time for the High Holidays, takes its name from a phrase attributed to the Talmud. “Jewish study, much like art, prioritizes asking big questions over claiming to have answers,” For Freedoms said in a statement.

A graphic with a blue background, and the following text: “Tikkun Olam” in bold yellow block print in the top left; the Hebrew letters for “Tikkun Olam” in the bottom left in white text; “Heal the World” in green text on the right.



Deborah Kass said that she hoped her billboard would prompt readers to ask themselves, “What will I do to heal the world?” *Courtesy of Deborah Kass*

Curators Carly Fischer and Eric Gottesman placed the billboards in cities with significant Jewish populations, sometimes where participating artists had personal connections.

The billboards, which will remain on display until the end of September, come six months after the Anti-Defamation League released an audit revealing that the organization received an unprecedented 3,697 reports of antisemitic incidents in 2022. They are not the only billboard campaigns fighting antisemitism; several other organizations such as JewBelong and ShineALight have placed ads to fight antisemitism, with mixed reception.

On Los Angeles’s TCL Chinese Theater, Zoë Buckman and Alex Woz placed the words “USE YOUR VOICE: CALL OUT ANTISEMITISM” in block text.

But most artists took a less direct approach. Above the W Hotel in Boston, photographer Wyatt Gallery designed a digital billboard that evokes a call to prayer more than a call to action, with the word “חולשׁ” in Hebrew, its transliteration “Shalom,” and its English translation “Peace,” alternating in large, white script in front of a photo of a sunlit synagogue.

A street corner with, on the left, a restaurant with a vertical sign that reads “Mission.” On the corner, a dark blue digital panel with an image of a woman curled into a ball, bathing, captioned “Rabbi Haviva Ner-David,” and the words “water... where all is one...where difference dissolves...immersion...mikveh~womb...repairing our world...together” in aqua blue.



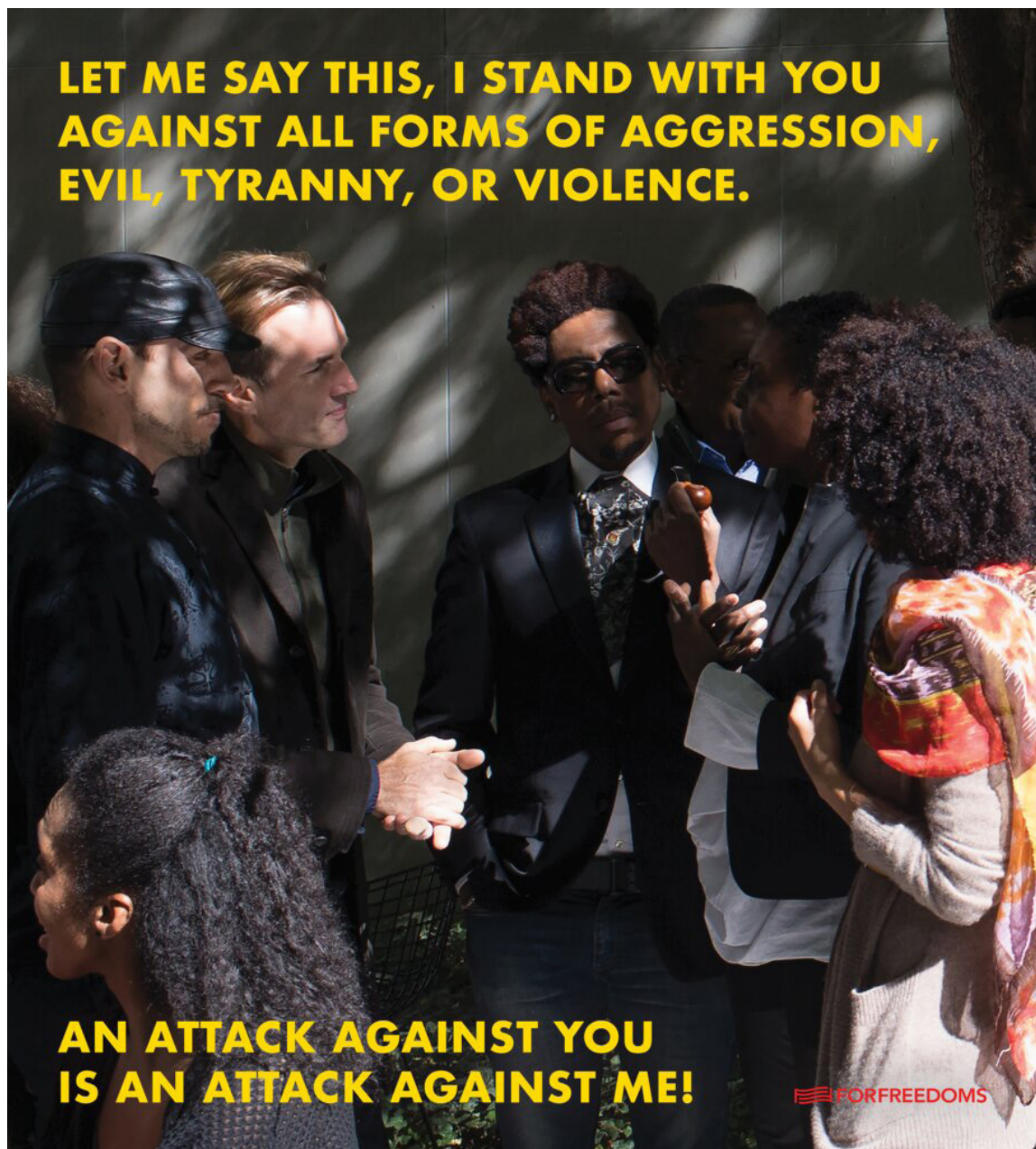
Tanya Habjouqa's Washington, D.C. panel was inspired by her own experiences in a mikvah led by feminist Orthodox Rabbi Haviva Ner-David.

Tanya Habjouqa, a Jordanian-American photojournalist based in East Jerusalem, designed a wrap-around blue-scale billboard on a Washington, D.C. street corner that immerses passersby in water imagery: a photo of the feminist Orthodox Rabbi Haviva Ner-David in a mikvah, or Jewish ritual bath, alongside aqua blue phrases such as “*mikveh~womb*,” “where difference dissolves,” and “repairing our world together.”

The billboard tells a personal story for Habjouqa, who has spent most of the last ten years documenting the lives of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Ner-David is her friend, and she invited Habjouqa into a mikvah as part of a practice of offering the bath to people who feel alienated by Israeli society.

Later, when Habjouqa came up with the idea of portraying the mikvah for For Freedoms' campaign, Ner-David was in full support. She told Habjouqa that, in this time of viral hatred, the spiritual cleanse of the ritual bath is exactly what the United States needs. Habjouqa said that she hoped her design would teach viewers about this concept of renewal while prompting them to slow down and reflect.

Five people stand in the foreground, looking intently at each other. From left: a white man wearing a black, embroidered shirt, black suit, and black hat; a white man wearing a black suit, clasping his hands; a Black man wearing a suit, listening to the speaker to the right; a Black woman speaking and wearing a black suit; a Black woman wearing a gray sweater with a colorful shawl on her shoulders. The words, “LET ME SAY THIS, I STAND WITH YOU AGAINST ALL FORMS OF AGGRESSION, EVIL, TYRANNY, OR VIOLENCE,” stand in bold text at the top of the screen. The words, “AN ATTACK AGAINST YOU IS AN ATTACK AGAINST ME!” are at the bottom of the screen in bold yellow text.



Carrie Mae Weems’s billboard will be displayed on the TCL Chinese Theater in Hollywood, Los Angeles, through September. *Courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems*

Habjouqa, who is of Circassian descent and identifies as agnostic, said that her time covering the struggles of Palestinians has reinforced the importance of fighting all forms of oppression. “Antisemitism is another symptom of rising intolerance,” she said. “It’s all connected.”

Kass said that she is happy to see Jews and other marginalized people supporting each other against hate: “The majority of Americans are being attacked. So let’s get together.”

Though Kass is hesitant to predict a quick and easy victory against something as ancient as antisemitism — “In the scheme of things, what has ever helped?” she wondered aloud — she said that she hopes that her billboard prompts pedestrians and drivers in Columbus to take responsibility for fixing what’s broken, and ask themselves, “What are you going to do to heal the world?”



Joel Mesler turned to Yiddish humor for his billboard, displayed in Atlanta, Georgia. *Courtesy of Joel Mesler*