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US public art project seeks to combat rising antisemitism

The latest billboard campaign by For Freedoms follows an alarming rise in attacks and threats against Jewish people and sites

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A billboard created by artist Zoë Buckman for the For Freedoms campaign *The Highest Form of Wisdom Is Kindness* Courtesy the artist, For Freedoms

A series of billboards by artists including Carrie Mae Weems, Deborah Kass and Hank Willis Thomas debuted this month across eight cities in the United States, as part of a campaign aimed at combating antisemitism. The project is the latest public-art installation organised by For Freedoms, the artist-led group that uses art to encourage civic engagement, often through takeovers of highly visible advertising space. Titled *The Highest Form of Wisdom Is Kindness* (until 25 September), the new campaign, which launched in advance of the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is intended both as a response to increased violence against Jewish people in the country as well as an expression of solidarity with Jewish communities.

“*The Highest Form of Wisdom is Kindness* invites artists to create work that channels an aspiration toward a world without antisemitism,” Carly Fischer, a curator at For Freedoms, said in a statement. “We want to inspire freedom of worship and foster a place where people of all faiths are free, decolonised and safe.”

In Washington, DC, for example, a digital billboard by Eric Gottesman displays the words “NEVER AGAIN” and “NEVER FORGET” against the backdrop of an American flag, highlighting relationships between nationalism, persecution and collective trauma. In Los Angeles, another by Carrie Mae Weems reads: “Let me say this, I stand with you against all forms of aggression, evil, tyranny, or violence. An attack against you is an attack against me!” In Columbus, Ohio, Deborah Kass takes a similarly direct route, with her billboard reading “Tikkun Olam” and that Hebrew phrase’s English translation, “Heal the World.”



Joel Mesler's 2023 painting *Untitled (Meshuggeneh)* has been adapted into a billboard for the For Freedoms campaign Courtesy the artist and For Freedoms

The project arrives at a period of heightened antisemitic incidents across the US. According to an audit published

in March by the Anti-Defamation League, there were 852 reported incidents in 2022, more than double the number in 2021. More than a third of those incidents targeted synagogues; Jewish community centres, day schools and Holocaust memorials and museums were also sites of harassment, vandalism or assault.

Works in *The Highest Form of Wisdom Is Kindness* can also be found in San Antonio, Boston, Atlanta, St Louis and Coral Gables, Florida, where

antisemitic fliers attacking Disney executives were sent to homes last year. Other participating artists are Joel Mesler, Ruvan Wijesooriya, Wyatt Gallery, Zoe Buckman, Doron Langberg and Tanya Habjouqa.

“We believe that the past is present and that critical thinking is vital in undoing vast social prejudices like antisemitism,” Fischer said. “When we deny our history, we are destined to repeat it.”

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