
Torah, Scholarship and the Mission of the Jewish Theological Seminary

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The *hineni* prayer chanted by the *sheliah tzibbur* on Rosh Hashanah has been much on my mind as I've prepared for the privilege of assuming leadership of the JTS community. The institution is strong, our faculty extraordinary, our student body excellent, our administration highly efficient, our trustees both wise and dedicated, and our many supporters extremely generous. The work JTS does in training rabbis, cantors, educators, lay leaders and scholars is good, very good. But we all know that we can do better and must do better because this is not an easy time for the Jewish people, or America or the planet. No communal leader at such a time can avoid concern that we are collectively *'ani mi-ma'as*, poor in achievement, when compared with the tasks facing our society and our world. Educational leaders in particular have ample reason to be — *nir'ash ve-nifhad* — awed by the challenges we need to meet in training a generation of students who are ready for the work required: not only competent but confident, appropriately humble but also suitably determined.

It has heartened me to find that some of America's most thoughtful leaders in the field of higher education have dedicated themselves and their schools to precisely this task. The books they have published in recent years are filled with the call to raise great institutions of higher learning to still "higher ground," to fulfill "a larger sense of purpose," to achieve public goods and promote private virtue. None of these books argues, as they might have done only a few years ago, that the mission of the university is the increase of knowledge for its own sake. Instead they

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speaking of the research university — I quote a typical formulation — as “a company of scholars engaged in discovering and sharing knowledge, with a responsibility to see that such knowledge is used to improve the human condition.” That was certainly the conviction of Martin Meyerson, *zichrono livracha*, who, when he was president of the University of Pennsylvania, and I was his student assistant, taught me more than anyone else about universities and their potential to do good. Our Sages, I think, would have applauded the vision of American higher education as a true *yeshivah shel ma’alah* on this earth despite the shortages and imperfections that are built into every *yeshivah shel mata*. The point of higher education is to take us and our world higher.

That has always been true of JTS. Our mission is scholarship for the sake of Torah: for the sake, that is, of Jewish tradition, the Jewish people and — through both of these — the world. JTS has always recognized obligations beyond its walls to the Conservative Movement in particular, to the education and betterment of Jews everywhere and to our country. We are a seminary, after all — indeed, as we like to say — THE seminary. Teaching Torah, working toward the greater practice and fulfillment of Torah in its broadest sense, has always been central to our mission. In Schechter’s vision, followed by all his successors, the indispensable path to that goal is first-rate scholarship and teaching. Our research, like our classrooms, must be distinguished by rigorous academic standards, including the critical distance these require, as much as it is characterized by commitment and loyalty to tradition and community. These have always gone hand in hand for us.

How can one prove loyal to the past unless one knows it, truly knows it, in all its complexity and variety? How do we carry that past forward in unprecedented conditions, with the confidence that one is preserving tradition rather than breaking from it, unless we have true mastery of the texts, the history, the languages shaping and shaped by both thought and events? How else can we speak cogently to the larger society and the issues of the day? And how do we accomplish these goals without serious, respectful argument *le-shem shamayim*? At JTS we have always known that honest difference for the sake of heaven makes us stronger — just as in-depth knowledge and thoughtful criticism of our tradition make Torah stronger. As Schechter put it in his inaugural lecture, “Faith and scholarship are not irreconcilable.”

He meant that as an understatement. So do I. *Shamor* and *zachor* must be part of every *dibbur* we utter at JTS. Nuanced remembrance is key to all that we observe and preserve, including most especially what we preserve by changing it.

This is never simple, of course, and there are many who would see the fidelity to both scholarship and Torah as an oxymoron. We do not, just as we do not see full participation in the society and culture surrounding us and total immersion in our tradition as irreconcilable, but rather, mutually reinforcing. We treasure the fruitful tensions built into these goals. The combination of intellect and passion, faith and criticism, is essential to the work our students do after they graduate—and particularly essential to the educators and clergy whose privilege it will be to help Jews live, teach and practice Torah, and in so doing to help perfect the world.

Given the vastly changed circumstances of the Jewish community and particularly of the synagogue in recent decades, the first major task that the faculty will undertake under my leadership will be a curricular review of the rabbinical and cantorial schools. We will be looking hard this year at what we teach and how we teach it. It's not enough that our future rabbis and cantors be learned in their tradition, and especially its texts and music, though they will of course continue to graduate with that learning and the ability to transmit it effectively. Future rabbis and cantors, to be successful, must understand the sociology of the communities they will serve, the consciousness of the individuals they must inspire and counsel, and the detailed workings of the institutions they will lead. They must be prepared to teach and represent Jews who stand alongside other communities in true pluralism. As if that were not difficult enough, our future clergy must combine mastery of these tools and skills with the development of an inner life of spirit and awe before God as they understand these. We will help our students do so, moreover, not only by what we offer them in the years leading up to graduation but in an expanded program of continuing education available to them once they are out in the field.

These changes in the preparation of rabbis and cantors for the Conservative Movement are only one of the ways we will increase our service to the Movement this year. Let me say, before going any further, not only as a leader of Conservative Judaism but as a lifelong Conservative Jew and a scholar of American Judaism, that I utterly reject talk of decline when it comes to the state of the Movement and its prospects. Malaise is in the eye or head of the beholder. It is certainly not in mine. I spent a good part of last year traveling around the United States and Canada listening to Conservative Jews tell me what they appreciate about the Movement, as well as what they would like to see changed. I can tell you that the desire to see the Movement thrive is strong, and the talent to make it so—among laity and professionals alike—is no less strong. We have many schools and shuls, camps

and youth groups, men's clubs and women's league chapters, that are truly excellent and whose success bears witness to that excellence. Others need work to raise them to that standard.

Quality in this Movement as in any organization is not uniform. We will direct JTS's resources at improving it and help to secure other resources for the task.

The Movement undoubtedly suffers, too, from insufficient coordination among its various arms. JTS will convene representatives of those arms to find ways of working together better. I am hopeful on all these counts. The fundamentals are there, the approach is sound, the set of Jewish paths on which we are walking are, to my mind, as to my heart and soul, the right ones.

JTS's expanded contribution to the Movement this year will come primarily in the area of message. I heard from many Conservative Jews this past year who do not know what their Movement stands for. Some believe that we stand for nothing in particular, or for everything, so long as it is somewhere in the middle between Orthodoxy and Reform. I want to reach as many Conservative Jews (and others) as possible this coming year with clear formulations, well-articulated and cogently argued, of my understanding of this Movement. I want to share why I believe, in all humility and with full respect for other voices in our community, that this is the way on which God and Torah want us to walk.

In his inaugural address twenty years ago, Ismar Schorsch, whom I'd like to thank once more for all the help and counsel he's given me this past year, and for all he did as chancellor to make JTS the great institution it is today, called the balance that we seek — the balance between halakhah and Aggadah, conservation and innovation, full immersion in the tradition that holds us fast as well as total embrace of the society and culture in which we live — by the name “stereophonic Judaism.” Perhaps I can capture something of the same point by commenting briefly upon the portion of Deuteronomy that we read this coming Shabbat. It on the one hand sets before us a stark dichotomy of blessing and curses, good and evil, life and death, and urges us to choose life. But the Torah insists on the other hand that our choices are often complicated. The hidden things we desperately need to know in order to choose wisely are stored up with God, while we have only that which is revealed to work with. The Torah provides for leaders who will guide us in interpreting its words in every changing situation. It assures us that the way of mitzvah is “not in heaven” or “across the sea” but here with us, in us, to do. God demands this part-

nership. The rabbis rejoiced in the gift of this partnership, and knew that all we are—heart, soul and mind; reason, science and history — is essential to this task.

Conservative Judaism is the way I have been taught — and the best, most authentic way I know — for bringing this vision to life. When I met Heschel in his office at JTS one day in 1971, ostensibly to interview him but in fact to ask the questions which most concerned me, I asked him—with the chutzpah that only a twenty-year old could possibly muster — where he got the nerve to say, as he did in the first paragraph of *God in Search of Man*, that religion had declined not because it was refuted by modern science and philosophy but because it had become “irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.” I went on to ask a few moments later how he could declare with such certainty that the war in Vietnam was wrong — and what good all his words of protest were doing anyway, what good words ever did. I needed to know how Heschel could make the tradition speak so forcefully to the crises of the day. “You doubt — that’s my problem,” he replied quietly. (I quote from the interview published under my byline in *The Daily Pennsylvanian*.) “My good friend, words count.” He dared to tell people how they should live, he said, because of “certain climactic moments of my own life, certain convictions and insights,” and because of “a tradition of wisdom which I feel has enriched me, has given me values.” That tradition, the source of Heschel’s insights and convictions, had given him, he said, not only a right but a duty to express them, to share them, and to try to have them guide human lives. His was no mere middle path between extremes, no mere balancing of tradition and modernity, but the Torah burning inside him, guiding his pen in his study and his feet at Selma, a life-giving path of meaning and community, intellect and passion, on which he, following his teachers, sought to lead us.

This path in Torah, throughout my life, has been set primarily by Conservative Judaism. At its heart — and the heart of the portion of Torah we read this week, and at the center of the renewal to which the High Holiday liturgy calls us — is the notion of mitzvah. That notion is therefore the first piece of the message of Conservative Judaism that JTS will address this coming year. Working with the Movement’s rabbis, we will facilitate and guide a grassroots conversation about mitzvah. It will be distinguished, first of all, by the fact that it is a grassroots conversation — not a set of lectures that tell Conservative Jews what mitzvah is and exactly what mitzvot they are obligated to perform, but a set of discussions in which they speak with one another about mitzvah in all the senses of the word stored up in Written and Oral Torah: what obligates them; what they feel responsible for; what engages them;

what they feel they owe to God or their community or their tradition or themselves; what they do because it is commanded; what they do out of sheer love. An intensive pilot program in nine synagogues around the country, prepared by JTS, will enable their members to bring the shared understandings garnered in guided conversation about mitzvah to bear on key texts and practices of their tradition. This conversation about mitzvah will, we believe, bring our Movement closer together; provide it with common language and vocabulary, and stimulate resolve for greater personal and communal observance. It will strengthen our pride in being who we are and living Judaism as we do.

JTS's contribution to the Conservative Movement goes hand in hand with our work on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole. I am pleased to see representatives of other movements in Judaism here today. I hope the strengthening of our several movements never blinds us to the fact that far more unites us than divides us. The ends we serve are larger than ourselves. In May we will of course be celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of Israeli independence — and will do so at a time not only of moral quandaries, inside Israel and outside it, but of continuing threats to Israel and worrisome decline in attachment to Israel on the part of American Jews. The data also show an attenuated sense of peoplehood among Jews throughout the world. JTS is committed to addressing these problems in immediate and tangible ways. Along with significant relevant faculty expertise, JTS has the advantage of close ties with Machon Schechter in Jerusalem and the Seminario Rabinico in Buenos Aires. Our ties with the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, too, will grow closer in the coming years. We sponsor Project Judaica in Moscow. We have the resources to foster exchanges of faculty, students and supporters among these institutions, and particularly between the United States and Israel. We have the resources, too, for the conceptual work needed to overcome the growing gap between Israeli and American Jews. I hope in the course of the year to announce initiatives designed to do that; we will not only be marking and celebrating Israel's sixtieth birthday with a series of events, activities and forums, but doing all we can to make sure that by the seventieth, Israelis and American Jews will be more closely related to one another, appreciative of the parallel paths on which they are seeking to build Jewish communities and revitalize Jewish tradition.

We do this, finally, at a time when the very notions of religious tradition and strong community are suspect in some quarters, because religion and community have so often and so visibly proven sources of violence and intolerance in recent

years. That is why the presence of members of other faith communities here today means so much to me. Heschel's speech across the street at UTS in 1965, "No Religion is an Island," made it clear just how important tolerance and mutual respect among religions are to the integrity of those traditions and the survival of the planet. He also explained why tolerance, let alone respect, has been so rare among the world's religions, why they are difficult theologically and not only practically. We have no choice but to try to bridge those differences. Louis Finkelstein pledged JTS to this purpose half a century ago, and the need for it is clearer still as we gather in the city of New York on 9/5, a mere six years after 9/11. The Torah demands we address this issue, and the welfare of America, not to say the world, requires it. So we will. JTS will do so, in the first instance, by making sure our curriculum prepares leaders who understand that pluralism does not mean relativism, that faith can actually be an instrument of cooperation and not only a ground of divisiveness and dismissal. In addition, we are already laying the groundwork for expanded cooperation with Christian institutions of higher learning and for dialogue with members of many faiths and especially with Muslims. Together we will help our students and our communities wrestle with the very real dilemmas of how to affirm one's own commitments while not denying or disparaging those of others.

It is hard enough for Jews, in the words of the prayer book, to give each other permission to sanctify God. But we do manage that, at times; were all of us sufficiently filled with love, adequately clear-headed, and strong enough not to bear the consequences — *ahuvim*, *brurim*, *giborim* — as the Siddur puts it — we might just prove able, even with members of other faiths, to perform in fear and trembling the will of our shared Creator, and to open our mouths together in song to the Most High. The prayer book speaks poetry and not prose at this juncture. It knows the difficulty of the task it sets, and I have no illusions about the ease of the one I have just accepted. But those of us who take religion seriously owe it to ourselves to make sure that tradition and community are sources of life and known by all to be so.

We also owe this to our teachers. I wish I could thank Heschel personally for enabling me to reach this day. He, like my mother and many of my other teachers, are among those who, as Deuteronomy puts it, "are not with us here today". I am grateful that my father, source of my life and my teacher, when it comes to life-force, is here to celebrate, thank God, at age ninety-six; I am thankful that my friend and teacher Rabbi David Hartman is with me here, along with other friends and teachers; and I am especially pleased that my wife and children and extended family

are here, all of them having put up with a lot more than chutzpah from me over the years and having validated more than once Heschel's assurance, Deuteronomy's assurance, that words matter and that love is transformative of individuals and of communities.

Teshuvah is possible. Renewal can be accomplished. We all know this from experience, and it is always the best teacher. We have some work to do this year at JTS. Thank God. We can do it, with your help. I cannot imagine better work to do, or a better place to do it, or better people to do it with. Let's make our classrooms sing with Torah in 5768 and carry our learning deep and far. May we all be written in the book of life this Rosh Hashanah. And may this year come to be written in the annals of JTS as one of joyous renewal, among the best that the institution has known. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*. I want to thank you for being with us today and in the future.