

Dear Chancellor Schwartz, fellow honorees, board member and supporters of JTS, faculty, and – most important today – new graduates of the various programs of JTSA:

I was given the great honor of being ordained as a rabbi by this distinguished institution 56 years ago. The ceremony took place on Sunday, June 4, 1967, the day before the outbreak of the six-day war. Elie Wiesel was the graduation speaker. It was a moment of high drama. Egyptian President Nasr had blockaded the Straits of Tiran, cutting off Israel's outlet to the south. Arab armies were threatening to join him in invading from the east and from the north. All of world Jewry's unresolved Holocaust traumas were awakened. We literally did not know whether Israel was going to survive.

56 years later, you too are graduating and being ordained at a critical moment in contemporary Jewish and Israeli history. As many of you know, it was only today's great honor that brought me back from Jerusalem, where I have spent the last four months. Quite a time to have been in Israel. For the first time since 1967, I heard lots of people I know and respect asking the question: "Is this Zionist experiment going to survive?"

Today's threat, of course, is of an entirely different order. Israel seems to have learned how to deal with external enemies. Despite much talk about military threats. – some of it manipulation intended to whip up patriotism – the IDF seems to be doing quite well. This year's challenge to Israel's existence comes from within. Ultimately it is about the breakdown of the social contract between the government and its citizens, a government that has the uncomfortable task of holding together large blocs of Israelis – distinct and sometimes hostile tribes - who discover that they have very little in common in the ways they perceive that state and the values upon which it should stand.

But I am not here today to discuss politics. What does all this have to do with you, 2023 graduates of the JTSA? In one way or another, we hope that each of you is going to be a teacher or leader within this North American sector of 'Am Yisrael, the Jewish people. You

will be rabbis, educators, communal leaders, or – the rarest of all birds in the flock – seriously committed Conservative Jewish lay people.

What will you stand for? What values have you learned in these years, both those taught by your instructors and perhaps those acquired in the course of your rebellion against them, as happened to many in my years here? What is the Judaism that you will want to carry forward? Where will you take a stand?

You see, the problem with the Israeli elections of 2022 is not just local and not just political. They deeply reflect the future of Judaism altogether, including that which we create and practice here in the diaspora as well. The demons who have been let out of the closet by the new Israeli government are dangerous precisely because they are what the Zohar calls *shedin yehuda'in*, *Jewish demons*, seeking power over all the Jews and our understanding of our shared legacy as Jews. They claim to stand as bearers of all the great power of tradition and the authority that comes with it. The damage these views threaten is not only to the State of Israel and its democratic institutions, but to Judaism itself and its place as one of the world's great spiritual traditions.

They view Judaism through an arrow and exclusivist lens. Their selection of sources from the tradition are those that underscore Jewish chosenness in a particularly insidious way. "Israel, My firstborn son..." "Only you have I chosen"..."I love Jacob but despise Esau...". Meaning, of course, all the other nations of the world – because they, by their very nature, hate the Jews. The world is divided between us and them, and it was to us that God gave His beloved Torah.

That reading of our tradition – now shared by many who are in positions of leadership, drips with an overflow of superiority and condescension. Because Jewish lives are superior, "Arab lives don't matter" – or matter an awful lot less. Human beings are shot dead by the Israeli army, by Border Guards, or by settlers almost every day in the occupied territories. Just read

the Haaretz daily feed. Some, but by no means all, of those people are terrorists. I don't have to tell you how that feels when we in America hear it. And we do hear it.

We are engaged today in a great struggle for the soul of Judaism. Those who read it in an exclusivist and xenophobic way have taken center stage. Many who understand that this is an ugly distortion, created in response to generations of bitter persecution, have retreated from the battle, either ashamed of their own lack of Jewish knowledge or simply having lost interest in the struggle. But this is about a legacy that we all share, one in which we want to take great pride. Do we really want to give our inheritance away to the racists among us? We need to assert a strong alternative vision to theirs. We need a Judaism that follows in the footsteps of the Talmud when it asks: "Why was Adam created singly?" and answers "So that no one ever be able to say to another human being 'My father was greater than yours'." We are all children of Adam and Eve. Each human life is of equal value, including those of Israelis and Palestinians. We need a Judaism that follows Ben Azzai in his great Talmudic debate with Rabbi Akiva over "What is the most basic teaching – *klal gadol* – of Torah. When Akiva said "Love your neighbor as yourself," Ben Azzai answered: "No, I know a greater teaching – **ביום ברא אתם** ברוא אלוהים אדם בדמות אלוהים ברא אותו זכר ונקבה ברא אותם "On the day God created humans He made them in his image, male and female He created them."

Why? What is their argument about? Ben Azzai sees a danger in Rabbi Akiva's verse, referring to loving your "neighbor." Maybe "neighbor" means only your Jewish neighbor. Maybe it means only your observant Jewish neighbor. Maybe it means only fellow Yiddish speakers and not Mizrahim. Maybe it means only Satmar Hasidim and not Belzer. When Ben Azzai refers to creation in the image of God, it perforce includes every human being in the world.

Some of the poison that has entered the Israeli bloodstream is American Jewish poison. Meyer Kahane, Baruch Goldstein, who murdered Arab worshippers in the Tomb of our shared

patriarchs, and Yitzhak Ginzburg who sings his praises and seeks to transform Israel into a halakhic kingdom, are all American Jews, products of our community.

Where have we failed? We have not used the opportunity of our freedom and our great prosperity in America to create a Judaism of what my revered teacher AJ Heschel called “Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity.” I want to say a few words about each of these. Moral Grandeur means knowing where we stand, feeling deeply rooted in a moral tradition that has taught us right from wrong so well that it is in our bones. I read you a few words from the weekly Torah commentary I send out, on Parashat Kedoshim, read a few weeks ago:

“לעני ולגר תעזוב אותם אני יהו"ה אלוהיכם...לא תשבעו לשמי בשקר...אני יהו"ה...לא תקלל חרש ולפני עוור
לא תתן מכשול ויראת מאלוהיך אני יהו"ה...לא תעמוד על דם רעך אני יהו"ה...ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני יהו"ה
(י"ט:י-י"ח).”

“Leave them for the poor and the stranger; I am Y-H-W-H your God (19:10).” “Do not swear falsely by My name...I am Y-H-W-H.” “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; I am Y-H-W-H.” “Do not stand by as your brother’s blood is shed; I am Y-H-W-H.” “Love your neighbor as yourself; I am Y-H-W-H.” The great power of this chapter is the frequent and dramatic repetition of “I am Y-H-W-H.” This refrain of God’s name is particularly striking in its placement at the center of the priestly book of *Va-Yikra*. We did not find it in this repeated form in description of any of the sacrifices, not amid the lists of forbidden foods, nor regarding the sexual taboos.

Think of this as a form of emphasis. The repetition of *ani Y-H-W-H* is a divine statement that *these* are the commandments by which I am truly to be known, in which I am most fully present. Or, if you prefer, you may see it as an ancient scribe’s form of underlining or boldfacing. This is what Torah, “the teaching,” *really* comes to teach. No wonder that Rabbi Akiva, one of Scripture’s most careful readers of all time, was able to say that “Love your neighbor as yourself” is the most basic teaching of Torah. He understood the special emphasis that this *ani Y-H-W-H* gave to that commandment. No wonder also that R. Yitshak Luria, the greatest master of prayer among the Kabbalists, opened his morning prayers each day by saying “I hereby accept upon myself the positive commandment of

‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” He too *heard* that emphasis in the text, the sense that “*This is what Torah is all about.*”

These teachings, applied universally as they are meant to be, are not just liberal American values; they are the heart of Torah, intentionally placed at the center of its center book. But here in America we have the freedom and status to stand up for them as Jews. We also have the obligation to speak out against those Jews, no matter how pious or learned they may be in other ways, who do not teach and live by these principles. If Judaism is just about halakhah, and halakhah applies only to ritual matters and to Jews, we might as well have stayed in the ghettos of two hundred years ago.

In Israel, I see a new Judaism emerging, one appropriate to the life of a renewed Jewish people. It will be created by the meeting of progressive religious people, myriads who are fleeing or half-fleeing from the haredi community, and young people who have discovered spirituality elsewhere – perhaps in India or the South American jungles – and are in search for it in Judaism. There I am most concerned that this new Judaism not be poisoned by excessive nationalism.

Today is Jerusalem Day, a celebration of the saving victory of 1967 that has been turned into an occasion for ugly marches and tauntings through Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Shame on us for permitting this! We Jews still believe in the psalmist’s words ירושלים -הבנוייה כעיר שחבורה לה יחדיו “The rebuilt Jerusalem will be like a city drawn together” – and that has to include all of its inhabitants, not just the streets. And buildings.

But we need a new Judaism in America as well, where we also have the fresh air needed to create it. This brings me back to Spiritual Audacity. We are too much on the defensive, trying too hard to hang on, rather than to change with the times. What do we really believe? What does it mean to be a religious person in the 21st century? That would be Heschel’s question today! How do we shape a tradition-loving Judaism that responds to that question? If the Rabbinical Assembly has a Commission on Law and Standards, that does very important work, where is our Commission on Myth and Creativity? We live in an era when the 20th century’s

two great battles that religion fought against modernity – that against evolution and that against biblical criticism – have been decided. How do we move forward, on the far side of those battles, in articulating a Jewish theology for today that is both intellectually honest and spiritually rewarding??

I had the good fortune, as a young seeker, to run into the Jewish mystical tradition, especially the writings of the early Hasidic masters. Thanks to the very best education offered in the Conservative Movement in those days, I had the Hebrew to begin devouring the sources. But I have watched countless thousands of serious seekers, now over three generations, turn their backs on Judaism, thinking it hopelessly outdated and authoritarian. Once they lost their faith in the God of childhood fantasy, they were offered nothing to take its place. They became “nones” or would-be Buddhists in the questionnaire about religion because we offered them nothing.

I have been working for half a century to articulate what could simply be called a Judaism for adults living in freedom. I am now near the end of my creative course. But you young people are just at the beginning of yours. We need you to enroll – however you can – in the task of the generations, that of re-creating Judaism.

The Sefat Emet, one of my favorite Hasidic sources, has a wonderful reading of the blessing we recite following an ‘aliyah la-torah, the reading of a torah passage. אשר נתן לנו תורת אמת, “who has given us a teaching of truth,” he says, refers to the written Torah, that handed down unchanged through all the generations. וחיי עולם נטע בתוכנו, “He has implanted eternal life within us”, refers to the oral Torah. “Oral Torah” is not a set of books on the bet midrash shelf, he is saying, but an endless process, one that remains alive within us! And only when these two forces meet, the Torah of tradition and its re-creation through that living spirit within each of you, does אשר נתן לנו turn into the present tense, נותן התורה, and God gives Torah yet again.

Think of this commencement. (as you rise to receive your degrees) as an 'aliyah la-Torah, and remember that you – and the Torah within you – are a vital part of its blessing.